

The background of the cover is a romantic scene between a man and a woman in 18th-century attire. The man, with dark hair and a slight beard, is wearing a white shirt, a dark cravat, and a patterned vest. He is leaning over the woman, his hand gently touching her chin. The woman has blonde hair styled in an updo and is wearing a dark red velvet dress with a gold necklace and earrings. They are in a room with wooden paneling. In the top left corner, there is an orange geometric design.

 HARLEQUIN  
HISTORICAL

# A Cinderella for the Viscount



LIZ TYNER

***“I’m sorry I did not get there sooner.”***

“You saved my life. Don’t apologize.”

Rachael smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “The marriage would have been called off anyway, even if Tenney had not been so malevolent. I would never have been able to disrobe in front of him.”

“A man worth his salt wouldn’t care about the marks.”

Devlin didn’t care if the scars were hideous except for the part of them that hurt her.

“Thank you for your kind words.”

“Honest ones.”

“Delivered with kindness.”

She reached to the lapel of his coat. “I must thank you. You are a rake on the outside, but a knight on the inside.”

“I would say there is a lot of night, but not the kind you are thinking of. Do not place too much store in me. If Tenney loved you, he’d just be thankful you are alive.”

He was.

The knowledge lodged in him with such strength his breath caught.

This would not do. She was not a woman for a rake and he had learned his lesson.

## **Author Note**

The idea for the missive Rachael receives in this book originated after I read a letter written by a man who died in the 1800s. He was writing to his intended. They never wed. I really couldn't grasp the words at first, just as Rachael couldn't in this story.

I'm not certain about what happened to the woman who received the letter, but I'm convinced that the dissolution of the betrothal was the best thing that happened in her life. One source said she later married and had a large family.

Writing this book was an opportunity for me to imagine her happily-ever-after.

**LIZ TYNER**

*A Cinderella for  
the Viscount*

 **HARLEQUIN**  
**HISTORICAL**

**Liz Tyner** lives with her husband on an Oklahoma acreage she imagines is similar to the ones in the children's book *Where the Wild Things Are*. Her lifestyle is a blend of old and new, and is sometimes comparable to the way people lived long ago. Liz is a member of various writing groups and has been writing since childhood. For more about her, visit [liztyner.com](http://liztyner.com).

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Excerpt from *A Marriage Made in Secret* by Jenni Fletcher

## Chapter One

The night was a success, in spite of his beloved aunt's pianoforte song, which she'd composed just for the occasion. The supposedly short piece had been the opening music and had lasted just shy of one hour—or that was how long it had felt to Devlin.

Now the guests gathered for the La Boulanger. His mother always ended her events with a dance easier for tired feet.

Devlin stood at the edge of the room, knowing the wide circle of dancers would likely take up most of the area. He noticed Miss Albright standing at the other side. One woman he'd not partnered. She seemed content to stand behind everyone. Almost hiding near the curtains by the window.

Their eyes met as he caught her stifling a yawn and her cheeks coloured. He acknowledged her with a nod to say he understood and took no offence, before he glanced around the room so she would not feel singled out.

He should have spoken with her during the soirée, but he'd just not seen her earlier—which seemed impossible. Perhaps she'd arrived late. Or maybe she'd spent the evening wandering in the gardens.

Now she touched her necklace, pulled it to the side, then returned it to the position where it had originally rested at the top of an extremely demure bodice. She stared off into the distance, absently rubbing a ring, a bauble that overwhelmed her finger. Not what he would have chosen for her. Not what she would have selected for herself, he wagered.

He imagined she was thinking of a man now and whoever the man was—he wasn't in attendance. Possibly the one who'd given her the jewel.

Priscilla Tremaine twirled by Devlin, covering him in a cloud of perfume and interrupting his perusal of Miss Albright. Priscilla danced with her beau, Baron Bomford. The Baron took her hand as he stumbled, chuckled loudly and then almost tripped over his own boots. Priscilla laughed, her bosom quivering. Her partner paid more attention to Priscilla's chest than he did his feet.

Devlin put his glass on the table, his attention riveted on the couple as they finished their rotation around the room.

The dance needed to end sooner rather than later. Priscilla and



the Baron were likely to embarrass themselves. Bomford was hearing a different song from the one the musicians played.

Then Bomford turned in the wrong direction and Priscilla reached out to correct him, shoving him into the steps. The Baron jumped a few feet to catch his balance, but stumbled, his arm splayed towards Miss Albright.

Miss Albright caught his sleeve, trying to keep him upright, but he took another step, reached with his free arm and grabbed a side table, pulling a scarf which covered the tabletop.

A lamp on the table wobbled, its flame flickering. Devlin couldn't hear the music or comprehend anything else in the room but the flame inside the glass globe, the oil and the dislodged fabric under the base.

Then the table stopped moving. Devlin's shoulders relaxed. The lamp rested completely immobile. Safe. The oil inside burning softly.

Everyone in the room watched Priscilla and her partner, including the musicians. The room echoed with silence.

The Baron noticed everyone had ceased talking. 'My apologishes.' He took a handkerchief from his pocket, mopped his brow, then took a reverse step, bumped into the table, reached out his arm and this time knocked the lamp askew. It rolled off the table and Miss Albright's skirts fluttered as she stepped aside.

Devlin saw all the flammable fabrics. The scarf from the table. The curtains. Miss Albright's skirt. The lit wick. All too close to Miss Albright.

He darted forward as the globe shattered, its glass collapsing into shards. The bowl of the lamp cracked, oil leaking into a puddle. Flames flickered at the wick, which would be easily extinguished with a stamp of his boot. Not yet igniting the oil.

Then Bomford turned, grabbing a glass from Lord Wilberton's hand. 'No,' Devlin shouted, lunging as he spoke. But it was too late. The Baron flung the alcohol in the glass on to the flames, splashing wide of the curtain, across the oil and over the wick, and sending the now-burning oil on to Miss Albright.

Devlin was already across the room when the liquid splattered across the flame and reached Miss Albright's skirt, igniting the flicker into a flash.

He knew what was about to happen before the flame began to take the light silk that covered her body. In two strides he had ripped the curtain from the rod, tackled Miss Albright and threw himself forward. He thrust the heavy fabric around Miss Albright to extinguish the fire. He wound the material tightly, forcing her into

the wall, suffocating the flames, and slid her down to the floor. One of her arms splayed out. The other wrapped around his neck and her fingers grasped a handful of his hair. He pressed the curtain even closer, using his body as a shield, ignoring the other guests, only minimally aware of the people behind him.

He found himself in an awkward position in a hushed room, one knee on the floor, his hands holding curtains firm around Miss Albright's skirts as she kept one hand clasped on his hair and her other hand reaching out to steady herself against the wall. The smell of burnt silk hit his nostrils and the side of his face pressed into an amazingly soft bit of femininity with a heartbeat close to his ear. He took in a breath and let the scent of her skin replace the singed cloth.

For an instant, he was frozen. He held too much in his arms, and emotion overtook him. He could feel life in his hands and the seconds before could have changed so much.

'Did you put her out?' His mother's voice rang in his other ear. He preferred listening to the racing heart, but he pulled away, Miss Albright still clutching his hair. Their gazes locked, a second that lingered, then she released him.

'The fire's gone.' He again tucked the curtain firmly around her, took her hand and put it on the fabric to hold it in place, then helped her stand. He made sure the burned spots displaying an appealing bit of beribboned chemise were covered.

'Oh, my. My dear.' His mother brushed past Devlin and took charge of the accident. 'Are you hurt, Miss Albright?'

Devlin's eyes connected with Miss Albright's still-dazed ones.

'I'm fine. But I don't know...' she whispered, wincing. She touched the curtain, slim fingers trying to arrange the cloth into a skirt.

No one seemed to know what to do next.

His body took over again and he sidestepped around his mother and slipped an arm under Miss Albright's knees and slid his other at her back. He watched her eyes, making sure the pain on her face didn't increase, and lifted her with all the gentleness he could muster. She gasped and now her arm rested loosely around his shoulder. He heard a second gasp which might have been his mother's, or her mother's. 'I'll take her to the sofa in the library so you ladies can care for her and I'll have the physician summoned.'

His face rested against her tresses and the strands brushed his cheek. The smell of freshly laundered clothing overrode the scorched scent and she wore a soft flowery perfume.

'Are you injured?' He spoke no louder than a whisper as he wove

through the stunned observers.

‘Yes. I think...not much.’ The now husky timbre of her voice reassured a pleasant spot in him.

He put the guests behind him and shortened his stride as he reached the library. ‘If you have need of anything...’ his lips touched her hair ‘...be sure to let me know. It will be taken care of.’

He tensed his body so he could lower her on to the sofa without jostling her more than necessary.

Two ball gowns fluttered around him and he knew the mothers were on either side.

‘I’ll reassure the guests.’ He kept his eyes on the sofa while he straightened his cravat.

Miss Albright looked at him as her mother stepped up to her and his mother pushed at his chest to nudge him further from the room. He felt a second determined prod.

He left, his steps swift to return to the guests with a reassuring expression on his lips. But he could still feel her in his arms.

Devlin opened his eyes in the darkness and twisted his head on his pillow. He pressed at the support behind his head. Sleep was impossible.

Before she’d retired, his mother had whispered, averting her eyes, that their guest had a few small burns on her...leg.

So, they were to be having visitors for the next two days while his mother reassured herself that Miss Albright recovered nicely. It simply would not do for the girl to be jostled in a carriage.

He slung the covers from his body. Stood. Pulled on the trousers he’d tossed over a chair and the shirt he’d worn earlier, ignoring the waistcoat.

He needed a cigar and a splash of brandy. Or maybe more than a splash. He kept thinking about Miss Albright.

The rug cushioned his bare feet and he glanced down the deserted, meandering hall, feeling alone in the house.

Devlin navigated the hallways easily in the dark, running a fingertip along the wall for direction as he found the library.

The door stood open and he saw the flickering light. His heartbeats increased as he imagined Miss Albright sitting inside. He needed to reassure himself she was fine.

Disappointment plunged into him when he stepped into the room. Instead of Miss Albright, his cousin, Payton, sat on the sofa, reading a book, brandy in one hand and a swirl of smoke at his head.

‘Can’t sleep?’ Devlin asked.

Payton stifled a cough and quickly pulled himself into a dignified pose. He placed the book on the table at his side, as if he didn’t

know who the novel belonged to.

'Bit of a cramp in my leg. Had to get comfortable.' He put his hand over the title of the story. 'Best toddle off to bed now. Thank you for inviting me to spend the night. B'lieve I shall.' He stood, stretched wide and grunted a manly groan.

Devlin reached for the cigar box, helping himself. 'You can't leave behind half a glass and half a cigar. Finish your reading and I'll try to amuse myself by annoying you. Mother will be so impressed you're reading the same stories she does.'

Payton examined the cover. 'I picked it up by mistake, thinking it was another of your father's books of pirate stories. Bloodthirsty men.' He mimicked a seafaring growl. 'Yes. Pirates. I'm sure I'll find one in it somewhere. Need to make certain I've not missed one.'

His cousin plopped down, took the book again and glanced over the top of it while he reached for the glass. 'Please stay. In case I catch on fire. But if I do happen to get myself aglow—do not graciously—' he stared at the ceiling '—lift me gallantly into your arms to rescue me.'

'I won't.'

Payton sniffed. 'I say, if Baron Bomford had managed to get a bit of a burn, you'd have let him walk to the physician.'

'Yes, but she has a much better shape than he does.'

'So does a sow.' Payton frowned. 'Everyone talked about her after you whisked her from the gathering. She has a beloved, so don't get any ideas that her gratitude would stretch far. If it weren't for her father being in trade, she's the type of woman that a mother wishes for her son to settle with.' His exaggerated half-cough, half-choke filled the room. 'I'll wager she has her embroidery needles named.'

Devlin lit a cigar, using the candle. 'You've got your decanters named.'

Payton gave a brief shrug. 'Makes it easier for the servants.'

'So, what does her father do?'

'Sells silver wares, mainly. Shiny trinkets, too. Jewellery. But Father says if you've seen one of the shops, you've seen them all.'

Devlin nodded. His mother had mentioned the family a few days before, but he'd not paid close attention. 'Thankfully Miss Albright seems relatively unscathed from the soirée.'

'Everyone counted the evening as a success. The ladies swooned.' His cousin's lip curled up at the side, his hand rose in a wave and his voice became high pitched. 'Did you see what big strong arms Devlin has? He can set my skirts on fire any time he wants.' He returned to the pages of the book again, shaking his head. 'Was blasted embarrassing to listen to all the babbling about you. Those

ladies spoke improperly. I was shocked.'

'Jealous?' Devlin sat, then, with his foot, he hooked the upholstered footrest and moved it into place so he could prop his feet on the woven fabric.

Payton spoke under his breath. 'No. I've my hands full enough now.' Again, he stared over the top of the novel at Devlin. 'I don't have to let someone else start the flames for me. Once they get sight of me, they melt.'

'I'm sure.'

'I suppose you have been keeping her a secret because you know that she'd never notice you if I am in the room.'

'I'd never met her before the soirée. Mrs Albright happened to be at Hatchard's a fortnight before and Mother remembered her from a childhood friendship and invited the family. They're related to someone in the peerage whom Mother knows well. I can't remember who.'

Devlin grimaced. 'I hope Miss Albright doesn't now regret that fate put her mother on the same path as mine.' Then he reflected. 'Miss Albright must use some special pomade on her hair or something. She smelled rather like a jonquil.'

'Jonquils don't smell. Do they?'

'They do. The red ones.'

'Jonquils aren't red.'

'The pink ones, then. You know—' he waved his hand '—the ones with the little petals.'

'Primroses.'

'I don't know. A thistle bloom or something. Nice. Flowery.'

'You're thinking with your thistle.' Payton stared at the print. 'So, will you be going with us tomorrow, or will you be staying here, alone, hoping for a miss to mistake you for your handsome younger cousin?'

Devlin paused. 'I don't have a handsome younger cousin.'

'Sad. To be losing your sight at twenty-eight.' Payton paused. 'So, are you going with us to Cosgrove's hunting box? We'll all be stalking our prey—at the card table.'

'Yes. But I may be late joining you. I must reassure myself our guest is doing well. She had a *most* attractive derrière. Damn—she smelled good, too. A perfect female.'

He heard the stout snort and raised his head to Payton, but Payton stared at him, open-mouthed.

He heard a feminine voice and turned his head to the doorway.

'I would not say those are the qualities of a perfect woman, Viscount Montfort.' Miss Albright stood at the entrance. Even in the

dimness he could still see the last of the lingering grimace on her face. He'd judged her too delicate and too winsome to give such a healthy blast of disapproval.

'Oh, Miss Al...bright.' He stood.

'Thank you for saving my life and sniffing my hair.' She stayed in the doorway. 'It's rose-scented. I like roses.'

'Roses are pleasant,' he said. 'Way better than jonquils.'

Payton stood as well, tossing down a healthy swig of brandy, snuffing out his cigar, then giving a most elaborate bow to Miss Albright.

'Don't hurt him,' Payton spoke to the woman as she walked into the room. 'It's not his fault he's daft. He's never recovered from the thumping I gave him when he was ten and I was only eight. Almost did him in.'

He slipped to the doorway and, as he stood behind her, he raised his brows, gave an exaggerated wink, put one lone finger over his closed lips, grinned and went out, still carrying the romantic novel.

She limped into the room.

'Do we need to send for the physician again?' Devlin asked, not taking his gaze from her.

'Absolutely not. My *most attractive* derrière—thank you, I think—hurts. I cannot sleep. Your mother told me earlier to make myself at home and I could have a maid bring me something to read if I woke in the night. I did not wish to wake a maid. I presumed this was the library. And I could have sworn your mother said smoking was not allowed in this side of the house.' She fanned a hand in front of her face. 'I must have misheard.'

'It's only allowed in the wee hours of the night and only for a short duration. A rule my father instituted and only the males are aware of the concession. Generally.'

But he couldn't keep his mind off her injury. 'I hope you recover quickly.' He waved an arm to the side of the sofa Payton had just vacated. 'Would you prefer to—?'

'Stand.' She limped inside the room. 'But please sit.'

He took a step to reach for the pull, but caught himself before he asked if she would like a maid present. Her hair billowed about in the candlelight. The borrowed dressing gown she wore was much too large for her and appeared as if it might slip from her shoulders at any second. Her bare feet poked out from the hem. The maid could sleep. He put out his cigar. If Miss Albright needed anything, he would happily fetch it for her.

He took a candle and lit the one nearest the bookcase before returning the light to its place. 'And in case you're wondering, my

hair smells of acorns. My cousin Payton's valet has been using it on him since he was born and Payton swears the mixture will keep the hair growing freely.'

He took two steps, stopping beside her, yet leaving a comfortable distance. 'See?'

She moved forward, touched the sleeve of his shirt and leaned in, sniffing. 'That's a different scent.'

He held himself proud. *Imported.*

'Did your cousin swear by it or swear at it?'

He studied the wide eyes which had a devilish glint. 'I do regret the accident, but it doesn't seem to have impaired you in any way. Particularly your sense of humour.'

'Other than a distinct inability to feel comfortable sitting.' She shrugged and smiled—the brightest one he'd seen from her. 'Or a distinct inability to feel comfortable anywhere.'

She glanced at an empty chair and he imagined he saw longing in her face. He could not sit down in her presence. It would be unthinkable.

'I have huge gratitude for you rescuing me,' she continued. 'But only a most proper kind. I do appreciate your help. And the pomade doesn't really smell bad. Just woodsy. Autumnal.'

'I regret the fire and wish it had been me instead of you, but to hold such a lovely lady was a boon for me.'

Her cheeks grew a little pink and she tucked her head, seeming embarrassed. 'You've had many boons in your life?'

'Only the necessary amount, I would say.' Then he frowned. 'But embracing you was something I will never forget.' He'd spoken the words easily enough. He'd just slipped into the light-hearted banter he might speak with friends he'd known for a long time. Perhaps it was because of the lateness, or the way she'd remained in his mind from the first moments before the fire until now.

The moment he'd rushed across the room, he'd felt his own life was threatened and it had seemed necessary to his survival to protect her. He supposed it must have been because she was in his home. A primitive response and one he was thankful for.

Then he appraised her, shoving all the nonsensical words he spoke so easily from his mind, even though with her they didn't seem meaningless. Miss Albright seemed to enter his senses more quickly and deeply than any of the acquaintances or friendships he'd had in the past.

Perhaps it was her seriousness, something he usually avoided. Only on her, it didn't appear critical or condescending or even truly serious, just thoughtful and aware.

‘Though I would have preferred our meeting under better circumstances in safer surroundings.’

The words jabbed at him, almost like a lie might attack his conscience. It was true he would have done anything in his power to prevent the accident, but he felt a sliver of fear that if it hadn’t happened, he might have foolishly missed the chance to speak with her.

‘I won’t forget it either,’ she said. ‘And I do thank you. I’m fortunate you were there.’ She shuddered. ‘It could have been so much worse. My parents are so relieved you reacted as you did. Father believes you saved my life. He said he’d just not been able to comprehend what was happening and then it was all over.’

‘Let’s forget about the evening and just remember this part of it. How could I not be intrigued by a woman who makes me think of—toasted roses?’ He wanted to put her in a better humour and not only for her. For himself as well. When she smiled, it made everything else fade into oblivion but her face.

She grimaced. ‘Your eyes followed Priscilla’s every step.’ She met his upraised brows and raised her own. ‘Or perhaps it wasn’t her steps you were watching.’

So, Miss Albright had observed him. ‘Priscilla has lovely eyes.’

‘She has very big, plump ones,’ she said.

He nodded. ‘Eyes are important features for a person to have.’ He locked his gaze with hers. ‘Your eyes are beautiful beyond measure.’

She bit her lip, studying him, her cheeks flushing again.

‘You may take that as a sincere and respectful compliment, as it was meant so. All of my observations about you are meant as appreciation of your womanliness and not to impinge on your respectability.’ He ended the words with a slight, respectful bow for emphasis. ‘And perhaps some normal preening male jealousy. You did seem aware of someone else and I cannot imagine you not having a sweetheart.’

She interlaced her fingertips and let out another whoosh of air, this one a reflection of the awe in her eyes. ‘Mr Ambrose Tenney. He is my beloved. The way that little lock of hair keeps tumbling over his eyebrow. He even has a dimple.’ Touching her cheek, she breathed out. ‘And his hands—so elegant. We are to be married.’

He held out his own hand, examining it while he turned it up and then reversed direction. ‘You can’t possibly expect me to believe you’ve accepted marriage based on this Tenney’s hands.’

He stretched his arm, staring. ‘Blast it. I will never be able to wed or even dare ask a woman to be my wife.’

She raised her brows. ‘What?’



He reached her in direction, showing her. 'I will never be able to compete with Mr Tenney. I have been marred.' He wiggled the smallest digit. 'Little finger.'

She took his fingertips in her own and his body started warming. The room was dim—too dim to be proper and they had been through a considerable adventure. She made him feel stronger than he ever had before, yet he'd never felt so weak.

She bent over his hands, examining them. 'Yours are...adequate, even if the one is out of alignment with the rest of them.'

Her lips turned up. 'I'm jesting with you when I use the word adequate. You saved me. Right now, I find them capable and competent. The best in the world. And the crooked one is distinguished. One might say elegant. Definitely distinct enough to make others jealous.'

'I would not go that far.' Inside he beamed. Miss Albright could dispense flattery if she wished.

'My cousin and I were playing king of the castle and the encounter became frenzied. I pushed him off the hill and he planned to take me with him, and that was all he could grab. I wasn't going off the mound.'

'Maybe you should have relented. Lost the game to save pain.' She tapped the little finger.

His hands were not the part of his body her touch affected.

'In hindsight, I could have let him tug me to the bottom and landed on him. So, for his sake, perhaps it was for the best. I would have used him as a cushion,' he said. But he understood something else about himself in that instance. The pain hadn't really hurt and he'd wanted to win. He would have repeated the incident just as he had initially done it. A clear victory. His father claimed nothing else mattered in a battle but a decisive win.

She glanced up, running her fingers over his knuckles, the touch so light he wasn't sure he imagined it. 'His hands aren't the only thing I admire about Mr Tenney. He's a barrister and will make a name for himself. He is so ambitious. That is one of the things I like most about him. That he's constantly striving to become more successful. I should like you to meet him some day, Viscount Montfort.'

Everything she'd just said singed him. He had no desire to meet Tenney. 'Whatever you wish,' he said. 'Except my given name is Devlin Bryan and I'd prefer to think we know each other well enough for you to call me Devlin as my friends do.'

'It would be an honour.' Her face bloomed as if he'd just given her a bouquet. 'And I would be pleased if you would call me

Rachael.'

Then she turned. Leaving. Bidding him goodnight. Limping to the doorway.

'Rachael.' His words stopped her. 'You did not select a book. Please stay longer. We've shared such an adventure that I feel I have known you for ever. A few moments more of your time would be a treasure—that is—if you aren't in pain.'

## *Chapter Two*

Rachael stopped and turned to Deylin, a man who'd taken her in his arms when they'd both been reduced to instinctive beings. In those brief seconds, he'd changed from a stranger whom she'd converse with reservedly to someone with whom she could speak her mind.

He was half-dressed, of course, only wearing a shirt and trousers, but it was his family home and it was the middle of the night. And she was wearing a borrowed dressing gown with no corset or chemise under it, hoping the cloth would not touch her burned skin.

Their familiarity seemed shared and, by the ease in his face, he didn't want to leave any more than she did.

Their bond surprised her. He wanted her to feel comfortable in his home and she did, but perhaps only because he was in the room.

Nothing else mattered to her but that she distract herself from the small ache in her posterior—and when they talked, the pain all but disappeared.

She'd regretted refusing the laudanum after the first dose, but she hated the way it made her feel—more a cloud than a person—a wisp of who she was—and her mind seemed dislodged.

Devlin distracted her in a completely opposite way. She could keep her feet on the ground and her mind safely in the room.

'I don't feel like reading.' Rachael took careful steps back, yet remained outside the doorway. 'Instead, I'm a bit like a child who doesn't want to go to bed and who is too tired to sleep. And my you-know-what hurts like it's still on fire.'

If she'd returned to her bedroom, she would have had to try to sleep on her stomach and doubted she could even doze off.

He took two steps closer, but didn't cross the entrance to the library. 'Stay for a chat, then. I've never been accused of an over-abundance of maturity and I'll attempt to ease the pain with nonsense. I can summon up a great deal of nonsense on occasion. Buckets of it.'

He leaned forward, and said, 'In fact, I can't think of the word maturity ever being used in reference to me.' His brow furrowed. 'Blasted oversight on someone's part, I'd say. Wouldn't you agree?'

'That's a trick question to ask a guest.'

‘So, you don’t think that was an accidental oversight?’ He beckoned her. ‘Tell me the benefits of maturity. Those have never been explained to me in detail. Or in any convincing way.’ He stepped back. ‘I don’t think you can.’

In one second, something flittered behind his gaze. A seriousness, immediately replaced by a carefree air, and a lopsided grin. She recognised the ruse. He was bent on distracting her, just as she’d wanted.

Suddenly, she felt cosseted. She didn’t want to hurt, though, and only by playing the game would the relief continue.

‘I doubt I could. I doubt anyone could.’ She angled her head in a challenging pose.

‘Try.’

She walked towards him. ‘Maturity. You either have it or you don’t.’

He strode to the window, opened the curtains wide, propped his shoulder against the wall and regarded the night. ‘Well, that’s my excuse then.’

She stationed herself at the other side of the curtains and copied his pose. She was so tired of standing.

The jesting evaporated. ‘I’ve always been mature,’ she said. ‘I was born so. If the governess did not watch my sister or me closely, I would make certain that neither of us got into any trouble. In fact, the woman would usually nap during the day and I would wake her if my sister needed something I could not take care of. My mother once reprimanded me for not playing.’ She gave a quick glance to the ceiling. ‘She said I must let the governess do her job. So, I did. Except on rare occasions when I knew I must step in.’

‘I had a problem with my governess about play also.’ He flattened a fold of the curtain aside. ‘My governess fell asleep once, too. On the same day a poor mouse had met a disastrous fate in the stables. I took the mouse and tied a string on it and pulled it across her feet. She woke up, screeched and clouted me. I predicted she would keep silent as she’d smacked me.’

‘Did you tell your parents?’

‘No. I feared my father might take her side and I knew my mother would not appreciate the humour in my bringing a dead mouse into the house. So, I disposed of it just as the governess insisted.’ He took the curtain between two fingers of his right hand and waved it back and forth. ‘She didn’t tell me specifically not to put it under her bedcovers. After all, she had clouted me.’

He dropped the curtain. ‘I had to spend the whole next day fetching things for her, and returning them, and when I refused and

went to Mother... Mother sent me to the governess, telling me that no mice were allowed in the house and boys who brought them in would be forever fetching handkerchiefs or having to listen to their governess sing. My governess sang a lot of songs that day, mostly ones she made up about boys who had to be good...had to be good...had to be good, and she had a voice that permeated the walls and stuck like a knife in the ear. The mouse was not worth it.'

'And if you had a child who did the same thing would you severely reprimand him and silently congratulate him? Or just laugh?'

He touched his chin with a knuckle on his left hand. 'I would be concerned if I had a son who did not do such things. Much like your mother who told you to play. A child must be a child. Then they must be punished and taught to act like an adult. It's the way of growth.'

'Why? If you can skip that level of immaturity?'

'Let us say that you received a double portion of adulthood at birth and I received none, and I have grown to the stage of acting as a man when I am with women, at social functions and when necessary. When I am with other men, I relax and revert to the way nature intended us to behave.'

'That is a shame.'

'Depends on your perspective.' He straightened. 'But I have the most enjoyment.'

'Perhaps not,' she challenged. 'Perhaps I get my personal reward from being responsible at all times.'

'Well, I fear that is something I may never know. But I do know how much enjoyment I get from being irresponsible.' The grin returned and her heart bounced closer to the sky. He was an effective painkiller. Better than laudanum, though, perhaps, not as safe.

She almost laughed. Perhaps all the medication hadn't worn off. She pulled herself back to earth.

'You get enjoyment to a degree from being irresponsible,' she said. 'Even you have boundaries. Everyone has limits. Some are just set further apart.'

'You are right,' he said. 'You're correct, as I hope you always are.' He held up a pinch. 'Your limits.' He widened his fingers. 'My limits.'

'Truly?' she asked.

'Let me believe it. I would hate to think I've put all the adventures of my youth behind me.'

'Well, you did jump into the flames earlier. I'm pleased you didn't

have a sensible reaction then.'

'It was the only one possible, Miss Albright.' He stared at the darkened window. 'If I had left earlier...' He shuddered. 'I wanted to. My brothers had already left.'

She felt the need to reassure him she was fine. To remind him he had been there and had done the right thing for her.

Putting a hand on his forearm, she grasped it. 'Thank you.'

When she realised what she'd done, she froze, then whipped her hand away. His shirt was paper thin. Much thinner than it appeared in the candlelight. Warmth, fine hairs and masculinity had answered her touch. She curled her palm close to her stomach and covered it with her other hand. She had to say something to erase the fact she'd touched him. She'd not planned it. It was a mistake. Something had been different. He was different from Tenney. Whereas Tenney was a balm, Devlin ignited something inside her.

He didn't even seem aware, which somehow felt like a slap, and he returned to the window. Nothing flickered in his gaze. Instead, he gave her a brief bow. 'Let's not repeat it, but it was the finest point of my life, I think. And I had nothing to do with it. I didn't know what was going on until I stopped and there was a...' He cleared his throat. 'The smell of burnt roses was in my arms and I knew you were uncomfortable, and I had to get you to privacy.'

Letting the silence continue, she wandered to the shelf with novels, and selected the one nearest her, without paying attention to its title. She needed to break the mood.

The spine creaked when she opened the book and she held it, letting her eyes linger on the words she couldn't read in the dim light.

'It is so odd how the night turned out,' she said. 'Mother was happy to see the invitation from the Countess. I almost feel apologetic that I ended the event. I'm thankful you were here.'

He returned her honesty with some of his own. 'I didn't get an invitation. I received a note to keep my evening free and was given the time to show up in evening dress.'

'You are a good son to do that.'

'Easy enough. I had to be somewhere on earth tonight, so why not here? It makes my mother happy and she asks for so little that I'm pleased to respond to her summons. One night absent from the clubs is almost a relief. Though it was getting dull until—'

He touched the windowpane's edge, flicking aside something invisible to her. 'One moment and the world changes for ever, according to the old pontificators at the club, and they are right. Perhaps that is why I buy them drinks and listen to their claptrap.'

Now that she watched him more closely, it was almost as if she could absorb the caring and generosity behind his eyes, but she questioned if it was caused by the late hour, the situation, or if he just naturally had a face that pulled her attention closer. She examined him again. His face. It did welcome her. A gift he'd been given by his birth.

He stepped forward.

She shut the book, tucking it under her arm. He took her fingertips and awareness pulsed inside her. She assumed he was going to kiss her hand, and in the light, and the night, and their improper dress, it would have been so much more than just a touch of his lips. Perhaps he discerned it at the same time she did.

He stared at her fingertips and rubbed a thumb over them, sending calming shivers into her. The moment brought her peace. A feeling of safety and security.

'If we were judged by the beauty of our hands, we would all be put to shame by comparison to yours.' Her fingers slipped from his when he increased the distance.

'That is kind of you.' Her words were a whisper and she didn't think he even heard them.

'Goodnight, Rachael. I hope you think gently of me and understand that I'm happy on my path of foolishness and jests, and I hope you gain much from your responsible life.'

'Thank you.'

Then his face changed and she could observe nothing beyond the penetrating eyes focused on her.

'Forgive my impetuosity. I must leave. You are a betrothed woman and I am a rake. In this case, it is a combination which can't be mixed, much like silk and fire. I must remember that.'

'Surely a few words between us runs no risk of anything untoward.' She didn't want him to leave. But it was only because she wanted to be distracted. Only because the day had been eventful. Only because they were becoming friends.

'No risk with a few words,' he said. 'But I feel we could speak long hours into the night and, as tiredness encroached, you might forget your maturity and do something foolish. I tell you as a friend that I would be hoping so with all my being.' On those words, he left, his footsteps not making a sound.

## *Chapter Three*

Rachael recovered alone in a small bedroom, painted with gentle hues of blue and with paintings of flowers. Every blossom in England had to be represented in the room and she wasn't sure she liked them as much as she had before. Now she was afraid that every time she saw a bloom, she would associate it with a burning sensation.

She propped herself on one crossed leg while she returned to her book.

Breakfast at the Earl's estate had been informal, which had relieved Rachael's mother immensely, and Rachael had been given the option of taking breakfast alone or joining the family. She'd reassured both her mother and the Countess that she was fine and chose to remain in her room.

That evening, someone rapped at the door. Rachael untucked her leg from under her and stood. 'Please come in,' she called out.

A maid entered, carrying two dresses, a small portmanteau and a paper in her hands. 'Your father returned home and sent these things to you.' The maid bustled around, arranging the clothing. 'And your mother and the Countess are taking tea and wanted to know if you might join them, but will understand if you don't wish to.'

'I think I will be fine here,' Rachael said.

Then, before leaving, the maid gave her the letter. 'Your father also sent this.'

Rachael took it, feeling a pleased flutter in her stomach when she saw Mr Tenney's handwriting. She'd never seen anyone who could make such beautiful flourishes. Her name had never flowed so elegantly as when Mr Tenney wrote it.

She'd waited all through his university years and, now that he was becoming established as a barrister, they were to be wed soon. The unfortunate death of his grandmother had postponed things, or they would have already married.

Rachael ran her fingertips over the letters of her name and it was as if she'd been at his side while he penned them.

Then she slipped open the seal. She read and the words didn't make sense to her. She read the words again, going slower, taking



her time with each one.

She folded the paper, waited, then unfolded it and read again.

They were to be married.

Were to be married.

Her betrothed.

She scrutinised the letter again. Surely it was a mistake. It looked like his handwriting, but...

He said he still wanted to marry her. He said it plainly.

She folded the paper once more and then again, hands shaking, then she took the missive and shoved it under her pair of gloves that rested on the table.

He still wanted to wed her.

They were to be married.

She rushed to pull the letter free and read it again. Yes, he still wanted to marry her. But the letter didn't make sense. He said at the beginning of the page and again, near his signature, that he would marry her. Yet it was as if all the words in the middle had been written by someone else and obviously the man who'd written them had no regard for her whatsoever.

She touched her face. Never had anyone criticised her so much.

She studied it closer, trying to comprehend something that she didn't understand. Her mind was playing some kind of trick on her, surely.

The movement and tension in her caused her injury to ache again and now it spread throughout her body.

Someone knocked at the door. She shoved the letter under the gloves again.

'Yes?' she called out, turning.

'We just wanted to make sure you are still doing well.' Her mother walked in as she spoke, the Countess right behind her. 'We had a lovely day and wish that you could have walked with us in the gardens. I even sent a letter to your sister to let her know that she needn't leave her husband's side in her condition and that you are on the mend.'

Rachael flexed her fingers out of sight. She bit her bottom lip. 'I'm well. Much better. Ever so much. But I wish not to jostle myself too much.'

Her mother stilled. 'I understand. Are you positive you're healing?'

Rachael nodded, but stopped when her chin quivered. 'The physician told me it would be tender. Might feel worse before recovering.' Rachael rubbed her forehead. 'I've just been moving. Made it flare up again.'

'You needn't be brave, dear,' the Countess said. 'I will send for

the physician immediately.'

'No. No. I'm fine. I'm fine. Really.' Rachael heard her snuffle and tried to turn it into a cough. 'It's just been a trying day, without resting well last night. That's all it is. I didn't sleep much and that's what's bothering me.'

'Rachael Marie, are you sure?' her mother asked.

She tried to clear her head. The medicine had obviously affected her. It had caused some cruel mire in her brain that flared up at odd times. When she read the letter again, she would find her error. The words in the middle would match the rest of them as they should.

'I'm well on the way to recovery, Mother. Once I can sleep well, I'll be as good as new.'

Her mother and the Countess shared a glance and her mother scrutinised Rachael. 'I suppose. But you must promise to let me know if your burns aren't healing as they should.' Both of the older women frowned, studying her.

'I promise.' She put as much reinforcement into the words as she could.

'Well,' the Countess said, rushing her mother out, 'we'll send for the physician again. Just to be sure.'

Before Rachael could protest, they'd both left the room.

She walked to the gloves. Her teeth hurt from clenching them. She relaxed her jaw and reopened the letter.

The words were still brutal.

It had to be a mistake. A misunderstanding. Lack of sleep. Confusion in her caused by the lingering effects of the laudanum she'd taken last night. Something.

She stared at the page, seeing her dreams evaporate into tiny little wisps that disappeared long before the light of day, never to be viewed again.

Either Tenney had become addled or she had, and neither option was a happy one.

Mornings were only to be endured, Devlin believed, and if one woke late enough their duration was lessened greatly. But he'd awoken early, concerned about Rachael.

He stretched, shook himself awake and wondered if Rachael had left. His rooms were so removed from the main quarters that it was unlikely he would have heard her depart. Somehow, he knew she was still there and he attributed it to the fact that he didn't think she'd leave without telling him goodbye.

Yesterday, Miss Albright had kept to her room. That evening, he'd even spent some time with her mother, discussing foliage. Or rather, letting her discuss it. His mother had joined the conversation

and she'd known he was no Capability Brown and wouldn't be designing any estate grounds, but Mrs Albright hadn't seemed to notice. He'd wager his last strand of hair that the Countess had noted and mentally commented on his presence.

Devlin had asked his cousin to linger one more day before leaving for the trip to the hunting box. His two younger brothers, Eldon and Oliver, were likely already there, and it would be a grand time for them to test outwitting each other with their banter.

He really should leave with Payton. Another long discussion of foliage and he'd likely sprout thorns. He already felt that he'd been planted at the house the last few days, yet he didn't want to uproot and leave. The imagined scent of roses lingered.

After he was confident breakfast was safely over, he stepped from his room and found his mother, stitching flowers on a blue ribbon and Mrs Albright sewing two pieces of cloth together, while they sat in front of the two windows. Gone was the camaraderie of the previous day.

*Miss Albright?* Something must be wrong. His words couldn't come fast enough. 'How is Miss Albright today?'

Her mother's shoulders lifted in a defeated shrug. 'Better, she says.'

His mother's lips thinned and then she added, 'You could tell last night that she was fretting. I sent for the physician and he spoke with her briefly, but he didn't think she was as co-operative as she could have been and he feared she isn't being honest about her injury. She claims she isn't in much pain, but her mother and I could both recognise it in her face. The physician said she will recover just fine, perhaps some scarring... But then he said my father would be fine and he died the next day.'

Devlin's equanimity shifted. 'The physician was called again?'

'Last night.' His mother studied her sewing, but the part of the ribbon she perused had no stitching on it. 'I insisted.'

Mrs Albright pushed the needle into the cloth and pulled the thread taut before speaking. 'She will recover. I am sure of it.'

'Perhaps she is well enough to take a small stroll?' he asked.

His mother and Mrs Albright took stock of each other before answering.

'I don't think so,' her mother said. 'This morning, we both asked her if she would like to join us and she told us she is fine, but says she is not suitable company today. We have been debating over whether I should send for her father to speak with her.'

'She wishes to return home,' the Countess said. 'I could not countenance it as she would be further from the physician.'

Devlin walked to the bell and summoned a maid. 'I'll find out if she's hiding symptoms.' Then he strode out of the room.

He met the maid in the hallway. 'Ask Miss Albright if she might like to join me in the library.'

As he waited in the library, the maid returned. 'She feels she would not be good company today and gives her regrets.'

'Is she in pain?' he asked.

'She's composing a letter, but she can't do it sitting,' the maid whispered. 'She sent me for paper, pen and ink earlier.'

'Could you please bring some sweet wine to the library and return to Miss Albright and tell her that I cannot accept any regrets from her? She can either speak with me or I will summon two mothers and a physician to her room to enquire about her health.'

The maid nodded, dashed out, returned with a decanter of wine and two glasses for the library, then she darted out again.

Rachael swept into the library, arms crossed, dress wrinkled and eyes dark. 'You seemed to wish to talk with me.'

Devlin stopped himself mid-stride. He'd been about to grasp the pull and send for the physician. But he forced himself to remain immobile and appear relaxed. Rachael needed comfort and the physician wasn't doing enough. Or the mothers weren't doing enough. He must find out what kind of assistance she needed. He'd get her to tell him what the problem was.

What good was an ability to soothe people if he didn't use it.

He poured wine for her.

'I was concerned about your burns. This might ease some of the pain. Yes?' He reached out, holding the drink.

'That remains to be seen.' She took the glass, thanked him and swallowed the contents. 'Delicious. Thank you for your consideration. I appreciate it.' She put it on the tray beside the other glass, watching the bottle's contents as if it might roil up like a wave. 'I have an important letter to compose today. That is all.'

He noticed the way her tongue formed around the word *letter*.

'I'm sure it's important.'

'Very.' Another precisely bitten-out word.

He just raised his brows, letting the silence prod her to speak.

She released the glass and put fingertips to her cheek. 'I have been up half the night, two nights in a row now.' She twirled around, facing the opposite direction, her upper body tense, her shoulders high, the knot of hair on her head coming loose from her pins. 'The first night because of the burn and the second night because I have been thinking of what I must do next.'

Again, he waited, letting his silence ask the question.

‘Something has happened.’ She took out a few hair pins and jabbed them back into place. ‘My curiosity is engaged, to put it mildly. I must compose a letter to Mr Tenney and it’s a difficult one.’

She looked over her shoulder at him. The distress in her face caused him to step closer.

‘Pardon?’ he asked, surprised at the elation he felt that she might no longer be entranced with Tenney, making sure to keep it from his voice. She wasn’t ill. In fact, he would say she was doing a sensible thing. No man should postpone a wedding to her.

She returned to her former stance, but this time, challenging him with her stare. ‘We have had some sort of disagreement and I need to determine what caused it.’

She seemed to expect him to argue with her and he saw no reason to accommodate. ‘This is a different perspective than you had earlier.’

‘Two years we courted to establish we were suited. Four years more we have been betrothed. Six years.’ She held her chin high. ‘And now, for the first time, it seems we are not in agreement. I may break our betrothal.’ She dusted her hands as if removing the slightest touch of him. ‘I would not marry that toad if he were a prince, a king or an emperor. I am not sure that he doesn’t have two sides to him.’ She made a fist, holding it over her stomach. ‘Both detestable.’

‘Then you missed getting a bad husband. But...’ His lips formed a straight line and he shook his head. ‘Don’t let it upset you. I’m afraid you will have many more chances for a bad husband.’

She growled, the same type of grumble he’d heard when she’d entered the library and he’d been discussing her. He wondered if she did that because she was fighting an internal war to keep herself quiet and not entirely winning.

It wasn’t a fierce or ferocious grumble, but rather like a trapped kitten that attempted to be challenging, yet it made one want to rescue it.

‘In that case, I will never marry. If all men are like him then it will be no great hardship to be a spinster. It will be a boon.’

‘Do you think I am like Tenney?’

She stared him up and down. ‘No. I believe you are honest about your inconstancy. Which is a good thing, in a bad form—or vice versa, but still preferable.’

‘I believe you insulted me and I instigated it, but I’m not sure I really deserved it.’ He furrowed his brow.

‘My father is a good husband to my mother and I expect my

marriage to Tenney to be similar.’ She looked to the ceiling, and harrumphed, again reminding him of a small, lovable animal that needed rescuing.

She still expected to wed Tenney. Devlin’s teeth ground together. Well, it was what it was. He would wish her the best.

‘Apparently, a good husband is rare.’ Her eyes fluttered. ‘I ignored what could be deemed boring qualities in Tenney and considered them a sign of his ability to stay constant.’

Ah, he understood. Tenney had said or done something which ruffled her, but chances were it would blow over soon and result in a rash of forgiveness requests, pleading and after a plethora of promises would result in all things being right again—for a time.

The image irritated him. Soon she’d forgive Tenney and tumble into her imagined, happy love fog. Tenney had probably flirted with another and she’d discovered it.

‘My father is a good husband to my mother also. My father once relocated to a different residence when I was younger which reduced the broken glass here, yet he returned within a few years. Faithful? Hardly.’ One side of his lips rose in a grimace.

‘That is a terrible thing to say about your own father.’

‘It’s the truth and everyone knows it.’

‘Even your mother?’

‘I would assume so, as I’ve heard her whisper it at an extremely high volume so the servants wouldn’t hear. And then she’s said a few dozen times that she wished Father’s mistress would make him happy enough to keep him out of the house. She said the woman is abysmal in that regard.’

‘Your mother is a gracious woman, but I’m not of that level of graciousness.’ Her lip curled. ‘Not even close.’

He widened his stance. ‘I’m going to ask you a question and I would like you not to answer it aloud. Consider if you and Tenney married and then, a few years later, you found that those delayed trips he took included a visit to another woman’s residence and you had two children, and he said, on bended knee, that he had erred and begged—begged—with tears in his eyes for you to forgive him...how could you not?’

She didn’t answer.

‘You would have a family to save by forgiving him. Peace in the household. A life that the two children wanted. So much and for little risk at that point. That horse had already left the stables. The husband is well and truly contrite and means the words, at least when he says them. Why not forgive and pretend to yourself that all is well?’

‘So that is how men think?’ She shook her head. ‘That is pathetic.’ She lowered her chin on the last word. ‘Men are hideous creatures if that is true and Tenney...’

‘After a while you either just pretend all is well, or just accept that all is not. Those are your only choices. Or you take a lover in return. You both keep the façade of a family and all is happy, but you go along your separate ways. The household is not destroyed. The world goes on. You meet on holidays and special occasions and perhaps you keep each other as friends. Good friends. Friends you can count on to be at funerals and weddings. Friends who are there at your roughest times. A marriage.’

‘What a load of manure. Do you usually deliver it by the wagonload, or is this just one of those special occasions?’

Perhaps he was better off letting her growl.

‘This time you are the one being immature and I’m the one with the maturity. You believe in little rainbows and happy magic.’ He fluttered his fingers about as if spreading enchanted dust for all to view. ‘I comprehend the world as it is.’

‘I hope you never subject a poor woman to a proposal of marriage. You are assuredly taking my mind off the pain.’ She pointed to her backside. ‘It feels much better to hate someone in front of you, than being irritated at someone from a distance because you know they are hiding something in their letter.’

‘I’m sorry that you’re in pain.’ Empathy laced his words. He lifted the wine and held it over her glass, waiting for her to give him the signal to pour.

She put her hand over the top. ‘No. I want my head clear. I have not been able to form a satisfying written response to Mr Tenney.’ She glared at the liquid.

He stood there, the container tipped to the side and the stopper in his left hand, and poured himself a drink. ‘A clear head in a betrothal? Is that possible?’ He’d expected his jest to bring lightness to her face, not increase the scowl.

The gaudy stone she’d worn on her left hand was missing. Ah, this must be a serious disagreement.

He closed the bottle and stared at the empty finger. ‘That was a sizeable ring you wore. Almost bigger than your hand.’ He spoke lightly, but her bad humour remained.

‘It had once belonged to his favourite grandmother.’

‘If it did, I’m sure she was glad to get rid of it.’ He lifted the glass. ‘It would have been unfair to have buried it with her.’

She touched the empty spot. ‘It wasn’t my favourite.’

‘Are you planning to end the betrothal?’

‘I’m not sure. Sometimes I wonder if there is someone better out there waiting for me.’

He studied her, gently shaking his head. ‘In London?’ He frowned. ‘Sometimes, there isn’t anyone better to pick from. Just other humans and I’m afraid that is the best choice we have.’

‘Don’t judge everyone by your standards.’

‘It doesn’t matter whose standards I use, if it all washes out the same.’

‘Devlin, I think you have raised immaturity to a new height—or dropped it to a new low. Or both. You’re filling up a chamber pot with it.’

He took a wide step, put the glass on the table, and gave her a bow. ‘At your service.’

‘You are annoying. I comprehended you a total charmer and full of sweet sentiments of no value whatsoever and now I find that you’re not a charmer and you have no sweet sentiments.’

‘Yes, I do. I just left them quiet as I expected you wanted that,’ he said. ‘I envisioned you could accept the truth.’

‘You’re twisting the argument around to make me feel bad. Do you not appreciate how rough these past two days have been for me?’

‘Do you?’ He stepped closer, moving near her like smoke held to the earth by the winds from above. ‘Do you really? I view one of the most fortunate women in the world in front of me.’

She chose her words slowly. ‘I suppose the fire...it could have been so much worse.’

‘Thin silk, cotton and you packed into a corset so tight that you wouldn’t have easily wriggled out of it. A room full of people, mostly filled to the gills with wine, brandy and powerful punch. All waiting for someone else to do something. No water at hand.’

She deflated, her shoulders and chin dropping, her voice lowering. ‘It still hurts. All of it.’

‘I’m sorry.’ He touched her chin, raising it until her eyes met his. His voice softened. His gaze was full of empathy. ‘What did that boor Tenney do to you that is so bad that it will take him crawling to you on bended knees and begging? Has he added another year to the length of the betrothal? Or sent you a letter intended for another?’

‘Neither,’ she said. ‘I have no reason to discuss it. There has been a mistake and I don’t know what to do.’

‘Are you sure? Six years of your life is a long time to toss out, but to ruin the rest of it to make those six years seem like a good decision could be much worse.’



She tensed her muscles. 'I don't know what to do. What to think. I don't know if I should be searching him out for an apology or vengeance.'

'If you decide on vengeance, marriage would be the perfect vehicle for that.'

'I would not throw myself under someone's carriage in order to cause it to turn over on them.' She put her hands on her hips.

'Ah.' He picked up his glass and took a sip, then gave her the smile that usually melted anger. 'You are mature.'

Instead of an answering lilt to her lips, she grumbled again.

He studied her. Whatever had happened must have been devastating, or he would have been able to coax her into better humour.

Or, she didn't perceive him the same way others did.

It became vital to soothe her.

He would.

## Chapter Four

She stood in the centre of the room, staring at nothing. 'Four years. Four years.' She shook her head. 'And two years making sure beforehand. I should have questioned that if it took us that long, something was wrong.' She pressed her fingers against her forehead.

Devlin briefly touched her lowered arm. 'What did he say to you, Rachael? Did the sap tell you he has another sweetheart?'

'No. He said he still wishes for us to marry.' Which she couldn't fathom as he obviously found her reprehensible.

'And just what about this has convinced you it is a bad idea?'

Instantly, she felt soothed by his voice and his presence. 'He said it in the vilest way possible. The most hideously vile way.'

She turned to Devlin and he clasped her hand, the grip reassuring. She looked at their intertwined fingers and felt his strength. The letter she'd received didn't seem so bad now. It was almost as if it were sent to another woman. Another Rachael, but she didn't want to be that person.

'In the first line he says he still plans to marry me, and in the last line as well. It is all the *tender* endearments in the middle that I have trouble with.' The expression in his eyes made her able to continue.

'What endearments?'

She shook her head, thinking more objectively about the words. 'Not ones I had heard before. How he finds me hideously awkward. How he detests my family.' Her voice caught on the word *family*. He'd always said he liked her parents. 'The shape of my nose.' She put a shaking finger to the tip.

'I find nothing wrong with it.' Devlin's eyes narrowed and he studied her face, turning to give it a better perusal.

'He always said I had a beautiful profile and that was one of the first things he'd complimented me on. I do have a good nose,' she said. 'It's my mother's. Not my father's.'

Once, Tenney had spoken on and on about how fortunate she was to have a well-shaped nose and that he had hated his own. In fact, the words he'd used to describe himself when he spoke with her were the ones he'd written about her in the letter.

'I have had no complaints on my appearance in the past and I feel confident my straightforward sister or my cousins, who were

generous with their opinions when we were children, would have informed me if it is peculiar. My cousins commented on everything from how I said apostrophe to how I held my spoon.'

He stepped closer. 'It is not too big. Not too small. Just the right size for sniffing flowers.'

'And then Mr Tenney went on to tell me detestable things about me, but then he was reassuring that he would marry me. He called me a not-endearing country miss and said he expected to get a tutor for me as the social graces I have are sadly non-existent.'

'What did he say about your ears?'

She gasped and covered her ears. 'Nothing. What? Are you going to tell me they are longish, or wide even for a baby elephant?'

He didn't answer immediately and she lowered her hands and perched on the chair.

Devlin shrugged. 'They're perfect ears. Perfect like your nose. He is obviously losing his senses. Or something.'

'He always told me I had been fortunate concerning the size of my ears and nose.'

'You are. And he is a perfect arse.' Devlin loosened the buttons on his coat and sat on the matching chair. 'Forgive my bad language and manners, Rachael. But I do believe you've been exposed to so much already and I hardly think you'll lose sleep over mine on your behalf.'

She shook her head, her knot of hair wobbling. 'I have already started a letter breaking off the engagement, but I could not finish it... Well...six letters. Maybe seven.' She frowned. 'I cannot compose just the right words. And then I read his letter again, and I'm not confident he wrote it. The other ones he's sent are all at home and my eyes blurred as I tried to remember exactly how he writes.'

Devlin put his elbow on the arm of the chair. 'A man should not treat his beloved so.' He rested his chin in his hand. 'Perhaps he wants you to call off the wedding.'

'What do you mean?'

'If you call the wedding off, he achieves the break without a care. If he calls it off, you are likely to be awarded some compensation if you want to seek it. Breach of promise. That sort of thing. Women can do that. Men are seen as cads who engaged a woman's affections, affections that she could have given elsewhere. Men are seen as abusing a woman's trust and hurting her chance for a future.'

'I could never marry him if this is how he tries to achieve his goals.' She held out a palm. 'If that is what he wanted, he could have asked me. Nicely. In person preferably, but if not, by letter. I

would have agreed and let the matter drop. I would think he would know me that well.'

'He doesn't have the spine.'

She jerked her head his direction, surprised at the anger sizzling in her. She was almost more infuriated at Devlin than Tenney. She took Devlin's comment as a criticism of her choice.

She met his eyes and could tell he'd read her thoughts. But he didn't flinch or soften his words. Instead he smiled, as if that would make everything better.

'If he had said in the letter that he wished to discard you, would that not appear beyond the pale to a court should you decide to pursue it?' Devlin asked. 'They would empathise with a sniffing miss, with one lone tear running down her face, while her father reads the letter that destroyed his little innocent's life.'

'I could never...' she said, then paused. 'Unless it is because of the way he told me.'

'He judged the letter the swiftest, surest, cleanest break. For himself.'

'He is a barrister.'

'Then by all means, you should respond in a manner he's familiar with,' Devlin said.

'I want only to be honest.'

He lowered his chin and blinked away her words. 'Please write to him and tell him that you were at first astonished that he was feeling so low, but you understand that this is caused by the pressures he is under in order to provide a wonderful life for you and the children you hope to have. You anticipate the happy day when you're married. Your love is as strong as ever—no—stronger now you're aware of the worry seeping through in his words. A tutor is a grand idea and perhaps your family may stay with you after the marriage and take advantage of the tutor. Send him your love and tell him you have been knitting baby socks for the many little ones that will reside in the house you will share with him. You're hoping to take in many stray cats and dogs also.'

She tensed her neck. 'I wouldn't share a table with him. I wouldn't share a cup of tea with him, or a few words.' Rachael fidgeted. It just hurt too much to sit and when she rose, she waved him to remain seated.

'You know that. I know that. But, please, don't let him know that. You must play the cards you've been dealt and use them to your best advantage.' His words calmed her.

Devlin sprawled, staring at the ceiling overhead. 'Just this once, put yourself first. Take the cards and put a few in your reticule if

you must. You can return to maturity later. But how many chances do you have to gamble on a losing hand and emerge the victor?’

‘That is not the honest way to do things. One must be straightforward and sincere.’

‘I agree, mostly. And sometimes you have to push back because if you say yes nine times and the tenth you say no, then you are seen as an unbearable ogre...because by the tenth time the spoiled, selfish person is convinced it is their right that you always say yes to them.’

‘I didn’t think he was like that. I wanted to spend my life with him.’

‘But you don’t want to spend your life with this as the most eventful memory. And one that leaves a bad taste in your mouth. You want to stand proud, stand tough and return it on a silver platter. You have no choice. Your memories of this must fade easily...and it may take longer than a physical scar to heal if you do not stand up for yourself. Graciously.’

She lightly touched the area across her bottom. ‘Standing is about all I can do. It hurts. On the inside and out.’

‘Maturity. It’ll do that to you.’ He shook his shoulders. ‘Ghastly affliction.’

‘Have you managed to escape *all* the growing pains?’

His eyes never left hers and his nod was slight. ‘Enough of them. Perhaps you were born old in the maturity of your decisions. But I was born old in the ability to deflect pain with meaningless diversions.’

He wasn’t jesting.

‘Right now, I would trade you.’ She said the first words that entered her mind.

‘Never.’ His demeanour changed and his eyes levelled at her. ‘Maturity suits you well. You only need a splash of irresponsibility. Not the whole container.’

After Tenney’s slashing letter, the sentiment of his compliment reached into the edges of her pain and washed it from her. She studied Devlin and he took in her perusal without a flinch.

‘Thank you.’ The words were spoken softly, but weren’t a platitude.

The silence grew between them, but the distance melted. He was a true friend. And yet, he was different from others. He wouldn’t judge her harshly if she told him her truths because his own were much more jagged than hers.

‘There’s nothing I would like better to do than to flop down on a comfortable chair and cry my eyes out,’ Rachael whispered. ‘In

truth, I have been jilted, though I am left to do the actual calling off of the betrothal.'

Devlin rose to his feet. 'Tenney's a—You'll be construed the fickle one.'

She fought for control. 'A jilt. Inconstant.' Her throat throbbed. 'I've never done anything bad in my life and now I'll be speculated about.'

He stepped closer, then held out his hand, waiting.

She took a step, and then another, and his arms folded around her in a loose embrace, surrounding her with the scent of spice and life, and the warmth of compassion.

She rested her cheek against the wool of his coat and the pain eased, and for a second none of it mattered. Not even Tenney's treachery.

'I feel guilty. For being in your arms.'

'For being comforted?' his voice said in her ear. 'Nonsense. Utter rot. Total drivel for you to feel so. The man showed a false side of himself to you for six years. He should feel guilty, but I assure you he doesn't.'

'It's a mistake. Someone copied his handwriting, or something like that.' She breathed in the secure scent of Devlin.

'Do you really believe it?'

'I don't believe he could actually write such a letter to me.'

'You're seeing him through your eyes. All people don't react as you do.' He brushed a hand across her back and it was as if he'd erased so much pain.

'Someone else must have written the letter. The reason my mother planned her next event was to give us a chance to announce the date of our wedding.' She reassured herself Tenney wouldn't do such a thing, but now she didn't care as much. 'It's a cruel jest. Caused by someone who envied him. He often said people were jealous creatures and didn't want him to succeed.'

His nose rested just above her ear. 'Is that what you truly believe?'

'I don't know.'

'You're too trusting.'

'I prefer to give people... Not to assume the worst.'

'Perhaps you should be judicious in that. I'm holding you. I'm comforting you. But in some corner of my mind, I'm hoping you and Tenney are finished.'

'You're only being nice.'

'That's how it starts. With kindness. Wasn't Tenney compassionate to you? At least at first? Wasn't he?'

‘Yes. I can’t believe he said all those things to me. Someone told him a lie about me, or someone else wrote the letter.’ Even as she spoke the words, she doubted them.

‘Was it his handwriting? Did it sound like him when he was upset with someone?’

‘Yes, but...’

‘He’s changed affections.’

She raised a hand, steadying it on his chest. His arms fell to his sides. She took a careful step in reverse. ‘That was a cruel thing to say. And Mr Tenney is—was devoted to me.’

‘Of course. He still carries you deep within his heart. And he loves your nose.’

That statement was delivered with such innocence and a smile. Fury filled her limbs and she instinctively balled her fists. ‘Devlin. You could use just a drop of my maturity.’

All humour flew from his face and lines formed at his eyes. He studied her. ‘You’re taking me seriously.’

‘Is that not what I’m supposed to do?’ She puffed another breath through her nostrils.

‘Of course.’ Then he added, ‘Are you going to listen to me or to a man who tells you he doesn’t like your nose?’

‘Neither.’ She crossed her arms.

He brushed the top of her shoulder. ‘Wise choice.’ Then he spoke, softening his words to decrease their impact. ‘I still believe it likely that he has changed affections.’

‘Are you judging him by your friends?’

His eyes narrowed. ‘It doesn’t matter if I am, because I’m saying the truth. You really need to write him the letter telling him that your mother may reside with you after you’re married. Perhaps a few cousins as well,’ Devlin said. ‘Write to him as if nothing was wrong in his missive. That way you’re safe if he goes along smoothly. Or...’ he shrugged ‘...you can do as few do. Use your head to think. Definitely don’t set the wedding date. You do not want your reputation damaged. It’s important to you.’

‘This advice from a rake?’

His brows furrowed. ‘You’d expect...what? Me to ask you to pray for him at Sunday services? No.’ He crossed an arm across his midsection, rested an elbow on it, and touched his knuckles to his chin. ‘I’d rather watch you take him out at the knees, observe him falling with his face in the mud and have you use his hinder parts to step on as a path to better things.’

‘I couldn’t.’ But if Devlin encouraged her, perhaps she could. It wasn’t the words he said, it was the way he put her feelings

foremost in his discussion of her betrothal.

He walked to her. 'Is it because you are too good hearted, or is it because you don't have the courage?'

'I have the courage. I just know he could not do such a thing. On paper. He could not.'

A door opened and closed in the distance. He looked towards the sound and lowered his voice.

'Then give him the benefit of the doubt. Put that sapphire on your finger. Keep the contents of the letter quiet and give yourself some time to set the deck to your advantage. Everyone who knows you sees you as almost married and it can damage you to be seen as inconstant. There will be talk. You do not want to be hiding your head in shame or embarrassment. And you will have to be the one to call the wedding off eventually as he has no courage to do it. He is thinking of himself, which is no crime. You must think of yourself.'

One thing she hated was deceit. Hated it. 'I will not practise duplicity. I did nothing wrong.'

'No harm in that. Sometimes.'

The words hit her with a swifter jolt than the letter and his jaw hardened, but he didn't beg her forgiveness.

She anticipated an apology.

But he said nothing. She couldn't read anything in his face. Except perhaps pity, which incensed her. She firmed her lips and he reached for his glass and raised it to her, a silent challenge, but she wouldn't answer. Not to defend Tenney or criticise him.

Then, with a brief bow that somehow irked her more, he left the room.

Emptiness washed over her and suddenly she was angrier at Devlin than anyone else. How dare he try to tell her why Tenney responded as he did. He didn't even know him. She steadied herself by grasping the chair.

Blast it. She wished he'd stayed. That upset her even more. She wanted to fight with him. Which just proved how much Tenney was suited for her. They'd never fought. Never, ever. Not once had they disagreed. Not a single time.

She stood, winced, and bit the inside of her lip. They could all rot. Tenney and Devlin both.

But then she considered that, after six years of her life with Tenney, she'd never experienced the loneliness she felt when Devlin left the room.

She must be mistaken. She'd got her sentiments with Tenney confused and her weary brain had made her think she missed



Devlin.

She touched her forehead. Why did it hurt as much when Devlin spoke harshly to her than when Tenney's words had tried to destroy her on paper?

Suddenly, she remembered Tenney telling her once that he would never be touched in a breach of promise action and she'd not really paid attention.

Now she wondered if Devlin had grasped what was going on much better than she did. She wanted to dart after him and ask him to explain, but she feared he already had. And, if she followed him, she would end up in his arms.

## Chapter Five

‘How is your burn?’ her mother asked, after entering Rachael’s room.

Rachael leaned against the wall, holding the letter from Mr Tenney in her hand. She turned the paper so that the writing wasn’t visible.

‘It’s much better.’

‘Well enough to manage the carriage?’ she asked.

‘I would rather walk home instead,’ Rachael said, patting above the burn. ‘I tried sitting and it was uncomfortable.’

‘I admit, I’m enjoying the hospitality of the Earl and the Countess seems content to have us here. She says the servants are competent at handling much more than two agreeable guests. She is making some calls now and we are to ask for anything we wish. She is also going out to a dinner this evening, but suggests we make ourselves at home in her library, and she can also provide us with more stitching supplies, watercolours, or pianoforte.’ Her mother chuckled. ‘She also suggests it is unlikely that Devlin will be here, but advises if he is that we do not ask him to provide music as he is forbidden to touch the piano.’

‘He is not proficient?’

‘She said his music tutor suggested fencing and he was a natural at it.’

Her mother stepped sideways and peered at Rachael’s hand. ‘And what was in the letter my future son-in-law sent? I’m so pleased to be welcoming him into our family soon. It will be as if we finally have a son.’

Rachael straightened a crease on the paper. ‘He’s busy with work, apparently, and it is wearing on him.’

‘But he still had time to write to you.’

Rachael nodded. ‘I am thinking about answering his letter now.’

‘Be sure to remind him how much I appreciate his missing a few hours of toil to attend our family *soirée*. It will be wonderful to have my sisters and your grandmothers here. It will be a lovely event and the perfect time to announce the date of your wedding.’

Rachael couldn’t speak. She had been so anticipating Tenney’s next visit, but now she had no wish to be near him. None at all. She turned to her mother. ‘Mr Tenney and I are—’ Then she took in a

breath. ‘Mr Tenney is—’

‘Yes?’ Her mother leaned towards her. ‘Are the two of you going to announce the date at the party as you’d planned?’

She saw the question in her mother’s eyes and knew how devoted her mother was to Tenney. She could not break the news to her right before the soiree. The questions her mother would be asked would override the family joy.

‘I just must speak with him soon,’ Rachael said, flipping the letter between two fingers.

Her mother moved a half-step forward. ‘What date have you decided on?’

‘I think that will be taken care of, but...’ She could not bear the hope in her mother’s eyes. ‘The brush with death has caused me to spend a considerable quantity of time thinking about...my future.’

‘I would not say it was a brush with death.’ Her mother’s eyes widened.

Relieved that her mother had not pursued the subject of marriage, Rachael didn’t want her mother to mention Tenney again. ‘I could have died, if not for Devlin. I was frozen. I didn’t know what to do.’

Her mother shook her head. ‘It was so fast. The fire just tumbled on to you and instantly the flames had taken most of your skirt. But Devlin—it seemed he knew what was going to happen before it did—and he’d grabbed you and pushed you against the wall and covered you to smother the flames. We all just stood watching, unbelieving.’

‘I could have died,’ Rachael murmured.

‘Nonsense.’

‘I almost went up in flames like a brandy-soaked plum pudding.’

‘Let’s not think about that.’

‘I can’t stop thinking about it.’

Tenney’s letter had already been composed most likely. And if she had died, her mother would likely have received it and opened it. Or perhaps Rachael would have been recovering from an even more serious burn and her mother would have read Tenney’s letter to her. That would have been a grand topping for the burnt pudding.

Tenney almost got out of the betrothal much easier than he expected.

Rachael blinked, the paper in her hand crumpling. ‘Life is so short.’

‘Yes. I’m pleased you’re going to marry soon. I want you to have all of life’s happiness and, once you’re married, I’m inviting the

grandchildren to spend more time with me so I will not feel so alone.' She stopped speaking long enough to give Rachael a hug and kiss her cheek. 'I don't hold my two grandchildren nearly often enough. I'm so relieved you'll be living in London once you're married.'

Rachael saw her mother's happiness bursting out. She could not tell her mother that the betrothal was likely to be over.

'Mother, I would not want to make a mistake and...' she couldn't very well say marry in haste '...do something I might regret.'

'I would not worry about that at this point. You are a sensible woman. You've always been mature beyond your years and used your head, as is evidenced by your choice of someone like Mr Tenney. Now you can follow your dreams. I feel you have been too serious your whole life. It's time for you to enjoy the results. It's time for you to become a wife. That is what you wish, isn't it?'

'I'm not entirely convinced.' She lowered her gaze, breathing out.

'You have been waiting six years? And you're not confident?'

She answered her mother, 'I shall dance at the soirée. With Tenney. And I am confident that I will make the right decision where he's concerned.'

And as she said those words, she knew deep in her heart that the betrothal was over. She'd read the letter one last time when she'd returned to her room after speaking with Devlin and no longer believed the missive had been a mistake. When she viewed it with the memory of Tenney saying he never worried about a breach of promise and imagined him penning it with that in his mind, it made sense.

She dreaded the thought of dancing with him.

Earlier that afternoon, when Devlin had held her in his arms and consoled her, her body had melted against him. Feelings she'd never experienced before had awoken, shocking her.

For six years Tenney had done little more than brush a fleeting kiss on her lips. She'd consigned it to his deep respect at the time and never questioned the lack of affection.

Her betrothal had been a sham and she'd believed in it.

She would never be so foolish again.

Rachael left her room and went in search of a maid. She clasped the paper in her hand.

Devlin stood at the door of the library. Her room was directly above the library. He could most probably hear her moving about.

'Is that a letter you've written in your grasp?' he asked.

'Yes.'

He bent so that he could read the name on the paper. "*Mr*

*Ambrose Tenney*.” Devlin’s eyes took on a wicked, humorous glint. ‘And how will Ambrose take this message?’

‘I’m not concerned about it at this point, but I have reconsidered everything twice at least.’ She lowered her hand and frowned. ‘I think he and I have both been wrong. A misunderstanding could have caused this. Yet, that doesn’t mean we are to be married. I don’t even want to be friends with him.’

‘It pleases me, Rachael, to hear you are investigating this.’ He reached out and took her fingertips, barely grasping them. ‘But you must be suspicious of anything he says if he is so unkind to you.’

‘I’ll take your words into consideration.’

‘Just be aware it is easy for most males to be rakish. So, if I were to agree I speak flattery, but you truly do have a most adorable nose, if for no other reason than it is in the middle of your face and beneath two expressive eyes, and lips that would make a grown man swoon, then how could you doubt it? Even if it is total nonsense—which it isn’t—I have taken the time to praise you. Obviously, I feel you are worthy of a compliment as I have proven it. My actions speak to you, even if my words are lightly given.’

‘I am much impressed. You have this business of being a rake down to a science.’

He put his other hand beside his first, and rested it at her wrist, then, he raised her fingertips, stopping just short of a kiss against them. His breath warmed her. ‘Rachael. Being a rake is a twenty-four-hours-a-day endeavour. One becomes accomplished at anything if one practises that much.’ Then he brushed his cheek against her hand before releasing her. She suppressed any pleasant feelings caused by his touch. ‘You are treacherous.’

He released her. ‘No. That boor is treacherous. I am accomplished.’

‘And that was rude.’

‘But not to you. I can’t be rude to you.’

‘Do you ever extinguish the rake part of you and just be truthful?’

He shook his head. ‘If you are born with big feet, do you cut off your toes to make them the size of everyone else’s? If you have flower seeds, do you lock them in a box or do you plant them? If you are born with a chance to put happiness on faces, do you hide yourself into a room and be silent?’

He stepped back, stopping at the door. ‘I must get on about my day. There are smile bouquets to deliver around town.’

Still at the threshold, he continued. ‘And, if you will beg my sincerest pardon, then I must let you know that you are the one being unmannerly. Everything I have said about you is of the

deepest truth. It may be delivered flippantly, but it is true. Whether you believe it or not is entirely up to you. You are exquisite and I don't say that lightly.'

Footsteps in the hallway silenced their words.

Payton strolled into view, his arms spread to grasp the doorframe, and leaned in. 'Ready to leave—?' He stopped when he saw Rachael and gave her a quick bow of his head. 'So pleased that you are doing fine today, Miss Albright. I wanted to let Devlin know I'm about to leave. A business meeting we should attend. Cosgrove's.' He turned to Devlin. 'You?'

'Go without me,' he said.

Payton spoke. 'Large sums at stake. You should come along.'

'Miss Albright is still suffering from the incident. I cannot leave her.'

Miss Albright's mouth opened, and she regarded Devlin. 'You must attend to your work.'

'I can always catch up later.'

Payton chortled. 'An opportunity wasted for ever. Don't let him mislead you, Miss Albright. Only one thing is more important than duty to Devlin and that is chivalry.' He made a fist and thumped his arm over his heart. 'The family honour demands that a lady's comfort comes first. Always.'

'Of course. Go on to your appointment.' Devlin studied his fingernails. 'Just don't let anyone cheat at cards.'

Payton clucked his tongue. 'You've given me such an idea. I could pilfer Alfred's marked cards, replace them with an exact set, but the spots indicating different cards.' He shut his eyes tight. 'Wouldn't that be the biggest tale of the century. Right after I took his money, I'll let him in on how I did it.'

'You'd get yourself challenged to a duel.'

Payton laughed. 'Why not? Even that could be fun, if done correctly.' He touched his chin. 'Can pillows be chosen as a weapon?' He nodded. 'The problem isn't with duelling—it is in the choice of weapons.'

'Well, if you're interested in a duel,' Rachael inserted, 'could you be so kind as to fight one over me? It would be grand if Mr Tenney thought, if only for an instant, that someone should be so infatuated with me that they might think I'm worthy of such attention.'

Devlin observed her.

'You want Devlin and me to fight a duel over you?' Payton beheld her as if the last bit of her brain had fluttered out of the window.

'It's not so farfetched,' Devlin commented. Payton didn't have to appear shocked at the suggestion of someone fighting a duel over

Rachael.

‘Of course.’ Payton caught himself. He pointed a finger and waved it rapidly between himself and Devlin. ‘I just don’t feel like shooting anyone today, or ever. Or running anyone through with a sword, particularly someone I could win money from at a card game.’

‘I have a fine pair of duelling pistols,’ Devlin said. ‘They’ve never been used and Grandfather purchased them new.’

Payton’s eyes widened. ‘You’ve lost your senses.’

Devlin shook his head. ‘A lady’s honour is at stake, Payton.’

Payton’s mouth opened, and he didn’t speak for a second, then he turned to Rachael. ‘Miss Albright, if I have done the slightest thing to impugn your honour, I heartily retract it. I would wound myself before I would hurt you.’

‘You’ve done nothing to offend me at all,’ Rachael reassured him. ‘I think you a fine person and a delight to know. In fact, you are raising my spirits.’

Indignation flared in Devlin. His cousin was raising her spirits?

‘Then what is all this duelling business about?’ Payton asked Devlin. ‘You know how fond I am of my boots and it’s hardly likely that I’d want to get blood on them or be buried in them.’

‘What if I show up at the hunting box and act enraged that you have dared to speak unkind words to Miss Albright?’ Devlin asked.

‘No,’ Payton said. ‘Never would I speak distressfully to her. Never. No one would believe that of me.’

‘We can apologise after we see how close we have come to shooting each other over her. The story would make its way around London.’

Rachael stood closer to Devlin to capture his attention. ‘That is kind of you, Devlin. Exceedingly kind. But that’s a considerable effort. It touches my heart.’

‘A duel could be a theatrical performance everyone is in on,’ Devlin suggested. ‘Those pistols may never have been fired and could remain that way.’

‘We’re family,’ Payton agreed. ‘We can’t fight—openly. And I rarely reflect on throttling you. Though now, I’m thinking, if I could be the victor, it might be a good plan.’

‘You’ve both brightened my spirits considerably and made me understand how foolish revenge is. Besides, I would only allow a duel fought with pillows.’ Rachael clasped her hands in front of herself. ‘Please forget we ever spoke such nonsense. I hope you both go to that business endeavour and that you don’t have marked cards.’

Payton removed an imaginary sword from a scabbard, swirled it in the air before tucking it at his side. 'Should you ever need a duel fought in your honour, you know you only have to ask Devlin and me. We will fight to the last feather in a pillow for you.'

Then he doffed an invisible hat, gave her a bow suitable for a room of royals and turned to his cousin. 'You sure you're not going?'

Devlin waved him on. 'There will always be another card game, but Miss Albright is a guest and I want to stay here in case she needs someone to duel with.'

'He is an excellent choice, Miss Albright.' Payton extended his fingers and gave a rotating wave in a half-circle. 'I must be off. All this talk of duelling has concerned me and I must distract myself with the solace and respectability of gambling.' He darted out of the door.

'You should go with him,' Rachael told Devlin.

'I meant what I said. I want to make sure you have this behind you.' And if Tenney had second thoughts and arrived to throw himself at her mercy, he wanted to be there.

He took stock of Rachael. He couldn't imagine her being so gullible as to take Tenney back. He believed she'd realised she didn't truly love him and it was a relief. He didn't want to think of her suffering any more than she already had.

But when he took stock of her, it dredged up the two hurts she'd just had. One physical and one mental. And yet her jaw was locked. She wasn't weeping and she didn't throw herself into his arms. He admired that in her.

She shook her head. 'There is no need. Really, now there isn't. You've shown me that, while it may take a few days to put this behind me, it doesn't matter. I am fortunate that this happened. Very. It may cause a tumble inside me, but I am thankful for it.'

'Did you truly not care that much for him?'

Rachael didn't answer at first. 'I did when he asked me to marry him. I believed I did, up until the words in the letter made sense to me. I had arranged my own marriage, thinking it would be a love match later. A marriage like my parents'. She laughed without humour. 'I gambled more than your cousin will, I suppose, and bet on a losing hand. The cards were probably marked in front of my face and I didn't know it.'

She shook her head. 'I bet on a losing hand. Now I have to live with the loss and the consequences.'

Ire flashed through Devlin's body. Women were to be protected. Particularly good-hearted ones such as Rachael.



He would fight for Rachael's honour. And it would be with the same determination that he'd managed to stay on top of the hill to keep his territory.

## Chapter Six

Rachael could tell she was on the mend.

The constant burning had dissipated and her steps didn't hurt any more. As long as she stepped slowly and cautiously, she felt no pain.

The carriage ride concerned her, but she wanted to get home, although she would miss Devlin.

He'd had some of his meals with them and been attentive and ever so proper. Her mother glowed under the attention Devlin showered on the ladies at mealtimes and he could make his own mother laugh at the slightest thing.

She'd been surprised at the difference when he was in the room. Everyone seemed happier and conversation flowed more lightly.

But she'd not talked privately with Devlin since they'd discussed her betrothal ending.

She heard booted footsteps. Her skirts swirled as she rose. Devlin walked into the doorway and the sunshine from the window highlighted him, making him stand out against the dark hallway and seem bigger.

Then she remembered him pulling her into his arms and lifting her. It was as if she'd weighed no more than a porcelain doll and he'd carried her with the same care.

Now he stood in front of her and secretly she admired his strength. Not just in his body, but the power he took for granted that was given him by birth and the depths she suspected that were hidden under the surface, but no one detected because he humoured everyone so well.

She shook the recollections of him from her mind. He was no more than a friend, but a friend was what she needed most. And having him for an ally had eased the awareness that Tenney didn't want her.

Devlin counted her a comrade and that was more value than a betrothed who considered her a burden.

'I sent the letter.'

He raised a brow.

'I sent the letter to Ambrose.' Yes, she would call him Ambrose to herself when she wished. He had said it would be romantic to wait until their wedding night to call each other by first names and

endearments. She stifled a gasp that she had agreed to such a thing.

Devlin watched her and she could tell he was aware of her gasp. 'So, you must care for him.'

She saw that he'd misinterpreted her action.

'Not any more. I told him we must discuss our feelings in person. My mother is having a soiree next week and I had expected to announce the date of my marriage. He was to be there and I told him he must attend. I don't think he planned to be present when he wrote the letter, but it is important to my mother, and Ambrose and I must have a chance to speak with each other.'

Devlin's jaw tightened, but then he relaxed and spoke in measured tones. 'Don't forget that you are to evaluate your interests first. Don't be soft-hearted.'

She put her head down, shaking it an infinitesimal amount. 'I keep thinking he would never be such a boor. Yet I know now our betrothal was a mistake. A man who cared anything for me would have broached the subject with me, instead of dumping all the blame at my—'

Devlin grunted.

She raised her eyes to his. She couldn't read his feelings and yet she could. She knew his opinion of Ambrose well.

'Would I be able to have an invitation?' he asked.

'My mother would be honoured to have you.' The weight of the event lifted from her heart as if carried by angel wings.

'I would be the one honoured to be in your presence.'

The statement created edgy happiness inside her and freed her from guarding her speech.

'I so dread the next meeting with him. I never want to be near him again. I read the letter yet once more after we spoke and I cannot find any explanation other than he hopes I will end the betrothal.' She needed him to grasp how she felt. 'I have not failed and, yet, I have.'

'How can you say that?'

'Either I waited needlessly for a man who did not truly care for me, or I inadvertently caused him to fall out of love.'

His eyes narrowed. 'Don't take the blame for all the ills in the world. No one is strong enough to bear the burden for every wrong and no one should have to.'

'I waited patiently.'

'You can't undo the past. You must go forward.'

'Spoken like a rake.'

'A rake who sleeps like a babe.'

'Because you have never lost your heart.'

He took her hand, touching the finger where the stone had rested, uniting them in a way she didn't think she'd ever connected with Ambrose.

'Did you lose your heart to him. Truly?' he asked.

'A little bit of it. But not the whole. Maybe half.' She shuddered. 'Not the best half.' She held up her little finger. 'About this much. One sneeze and it's gone.'

'It'll likely grow again, bigger and healthier than ever.'

'Not for him. Now I am more irritated at myself for waiting all these years than I am for anything else. I'm wondering if...' she hated to admit it '...if I did not push him to wed because I didn't want to marry him either. And why did I not see that? I don't know who to be angriest at. Him or myself.'

'I can answer that for you. Him.'

She pressed her lips firmly together.

'The sooner you get over the anger, the better off you'll be,' he said. 'But, please, before you toss Tenney from your life, let him believe you're not breaking the betrothal. If he thinks he's not getting what he wants, you'll be more likely to witness his true self and you'll be able to put him behind you so much faster.'

'I'd hoped it was all a misunderstanding, but now, even if it is, I can't go forward with a wedding.'

He clasped the fourth finger on her left hand. 'I would never wish for you to wed a person who doesn't cherish you. Sharing a home with a person who finds reason to disparage you is like having shoes with thorns in them. It doesn't matter how sturdy your shoe is, or how shiny, or how well-crafted it is, it's still going to be an uneasy stride.'

She raised a brow, her words light, but with an undercurrent of directness. 'Are you happy?'

Something passed behind his eyes. A barrier she'd never seen before, but then it faded.

'Happiness? All that matters is how I can put other people at ease. It is natural to me and I'm fortunate I inherited the ability. As the eldest child, I'm to be the protector of our family name. To smooth things over.'

'Are you happy?' she repeated, a challenge in her voice.

'I never think about whether I am or not. Happiness isn't part of my role in life. And today—' his fingertips traced her jawline, leaving a trail of awareness behind '—your happiness is what's most important to me.'

He retreated, the contact seeming to mean nothing to him. 'If you will ensure that I get an invitation, then I will attend the soirée. It is

totally up to you.’

She watched him leave, his natural strength arousing the femininity in her and making her aware of the masculinity in him.

She would see that he got an invitation. If someone had to be cut from the guest list, it would be Tenney.

Rachael’s mother had been ecstatic that the Viscount wanted to attend their soirée. In fact, she’d been overwhelmed that Devlin might wish to be there and immediately set about double checking everything for the night. Her father had claimed it the best idea he’d heard in a long time and extended the invitation to the Viscount’s entire family.

She tried to carry on as if it were going to be the night she would reveal her wedding date. Every time her mother detected any hesitation, Rachael claimed it was because of the burns. In truth, the pain hardly ever returned, but she still had to be cautious about how she stepped and dancing sounded excruciating.

Dancing wasn’t the only part of the evening which concerned her. She hoped she could trust Tenney not to cause any disruption—after all, she would be giving him what he wanted. If he reacted publicly with anything but composure, he could hurt his future prospects. And he would sense that he must act with decorum. At least, to everyone but her.

On the night of the celebration, right as a carriage arrived at the entrance of the house, Rachael asked her mother to forgo announcing the wedding plans to the guests. A look of concern flashed across the older woman’s face, but Rachael quickly reassured her mother with a kiss to the cheek.

A few moments later, Devlin walked into the room, his mother on his arm. Payton with them. The first ones to arrive. While Payton spoke with Rachael’s father, her mother greeted the Countess like a sister and, after some quick compliments, they immediately started talking about Rachael’s injury, their children and footwear almost in the same breath.

Devlin gave her a slight shrug and a companionable look as if to say *Mothers*.

His dark frock coat had no special buttons. His white cravat had a simple tie this time instead of the more elaborate one he’d worn at his mother’s event. He appeared taller in the dark evening dress with a plain neckcloth and she wondered if his tailor and valet knew the effect they were creating—she was convinced they did. The simpler dress suited him best.

He wandered to her side, ostensibly to admire the fireplace

carvings.

‘I’m dreading this,’ she said.

‘Best to get it over.’ His attention appeared to be on the fireplace.

‘Your father didn’t arrive?’ she asked.

A flicker of his eyes in her direction. ‘No. He could not attend because Mother wanted to enjoy herself.’

She hesitated, questioning him with her expression, and accepting his acknowledging nod.

‘I would also like to have a pleasant evening, but I suspect it will be impossible—’ his gaze glanced to the entrance ‘—since that friend of yours, if he can find his backbone, may also be here.’

‘I have mixed feelings. I am happy for a chance to get him out of my life, but I cannot ruin this night for my parents. And I would like...’ She drew in a deep breath. ‘I would like to just write him a letter and tell him it is over between us. Now I understand his cowardice.’

‘You may understand. You accept that it is easier, but you are still willing to handle it face to face. That is the difference between an adult and an immature blob of human flesh that is little better than what might be scraped from the sole of a boot. Not, of course, that I specifically am talking about Tenney.’

He sounded irritated, but his smile was still in place and that heartened her. Then a troubling idea lodged itself in her mind. Was she jumping from one entanglement to another at a breakneck speed? A predicament that would end badly? She truly wasn’t in Devlin’s social world and she accepted that. She could never see herself as a leader in society and Devlin’s whole family was natural to that role.

She examined Devlin’s face. No, they were entering a friendship. Her spirits blossomed. A true, lasting friendship was so rare. That would be much safer than anything else.

How she hoped they would remain friends.

‘When he arrives, just remember to hold your head high—if he appears... You are entrancing. A goddess in human form.’ Devlin’s voice rolled over her, and settled, nestling against her.

His words embraced her first and then concern crept in. She could not fall into a deeper crevasse upon leaping out of a shallow one.

‘Next time,’ she murmured. ‘Leave off the goddess part and I might believe you.’

He laughed. ‘It’s true.’ Brushing a hand at her shoulders, he aligned his face near hers. ‘Remember, my job as a rake is not to lie, but to merely point out what others are noticing but not

mentioning.'

She wrinkled her nose, and he copied her movement, adding a teasing grin. But a little tickle of excitement lodged inside her. Devlin bolstered her spirits so and, when she compared him to Tenney who had always wanted to maintain decorum at all costs, Tenney felt more like an anchor than a beloved.

Immediately afterwards, he noted more visitors arriving. Her aunt and uncle walked through the door and made their way to her mother.

'Do you think your Tenney will be brave enough to show up after he made a complete fool of himself?' he asked.

She heard the emphasis as he'd said Tenney, but her mind focused on the word *your* and her jaw tightened. She didn't correct Devlin, but Tenney was no longer hers...if he had ever been.

No, she decided, he'd never been hers no matter how she had deluded herself.

She returned to the conversation. 'He should. In the note I sent him, I told him we must talk.' Frowning, she added, 'I wrote that we must have had a misunderstanding and I wished to clear it...and that my mother expects me to announce the date for our wedding tonight.' She pressed her lips into a line. 'It was a short missive. A paragraph when I've never written less than a page in the past.'

His voice rumbled low. 'I should have delivered it for you.'

That image formed in her mind and she was forced to laugh. 'I might have let you.'

Now that she'd spoken with Devlin, the nervousness didn't seem so overwhelming. She'd spent more time on her appearance than she'd ever spent on one night in her life. She feared her coiffure might tumble down if she changed direction too quickly. And she didn't dare to bend over or her bosom might escape as well. And, of course, dancing would be a struggle with the new shoes and her having to take care not to reawaken the injury.

'I expect to have a grand time.' She put bravado in her words and waved her arm as if she were an empress. Then her courage plunged.

'I'm a fraud,' she whispered to him. 'I saw the mirror and I didn't even look like myself.'

'Then there are two of you, both beautiful.'

She pondered on his response. It would have been so easy for him to fumble with an answer. Tenney would have. If Devlin had complimented the woman in the mirror, then he would have insulted the true person she was. And if he'd praised the true her, it would have been an insult to the care she'd taken on her

appearance.

‘You have a positive word for every situation.’

‘Except one. Remember, a man who’ll spout untruths about your nose will lie about anything. And I repeat, you have a stunning nose, equal to the absolute best in London.’

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘I would have left it behind out of consideration for Mr Tenney’s feelings if I could have, but I decided that would attract too much notice.’

He gave a quick clasp of her hand, and he smiled. ‘You will be fine tonight. You are in your home, surrounded by people who care for you.’

Mentally, Rachael repeated the words of the letter, then reminded herself her nose was fine. In fact, it was almost the only part of her that felt normal.

But even her eyes had appeared as though they belonged to someone else when she’d prepared for the evening. They’d been rimmed with a dark powder and appeared larger. Her lips had been stained.

She’d even borrowed a heart-shaped necklace from her mother—one much larger than she normally would have chosen—and wore it.

If men could go to battle wearing armour, she supposed she could go to a *soirée* wearing more jewels than usual.

She even wore several rings, including Tenney’s, and her stomach had rebelled when she’d placed the jewel back on her finger. She wanted to have it returned to him.

She remembered her hesitation when she’d first seen the gemstone. She should have listened to her instincts.

When Tenney stepped into the room, it was as if a cold blast of air blew over the spot on the fourth finger of her left hand. She made a fist and her hand instantly warmed.



## Chapter Seven

Devlin watched the event, keeping a view so he could be aware of each arrival. No one had attended yet who could have been Tenney.

Payton's hand appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. He seesawed his flat palm in front of Devlin's face. 'There are other people in the room besides your old flame.'

'You dolt,' Devlin retorted sharply.

'If you would have said it, I would have laughed.' Payton stood at Devlin's side. 'Mmm. She is rather fetching tonight. She can set me afire any time she wishes.'

'Stay away—' Devlin stopped. 'Perhaps you would care to dance with her? After her beloved arrives.'

'Of course.' Payton smirked. 'I could waltz with her for hours.'

'Mind your manners. But let her know she's endearing. Nicely.' Devlin's eyes narrowed even more. 'And you *will* answer to my boot if you are anything but the perfect gentleman.'

Payton chuckled. 'I see how it is.'

Devlin ignored Payton, his attention caught on the man with the over-dressed hair who had just walked through the door.

'There he is,' Devlin said, as the man's eyes searched out Rachael. 'I would wager that is the peahen she is betrothed to.'

'Actually, I've heard he's rather clever. Has plans to step up the social ladder if the ingratiatingly annoying way he once introduced himself to my father is any indication.'

'He's not as clever as he thinks he is.'

'None of us is,' Payton said. 'Including you. You're still playing with fire.'

Devlin shot his cousin a glare, but couldn't keep his attention from Rachael. She'd noticed Tenney and the recognition caused her to tense, her steps wobbling. Tenney stared at her.

Irritation simmered inside Devlin.

Tenney didn't even acknowledge Rachael. Instead, he headed straight for the refreshment table, a glare in his eyes.

'Ask her to dance,' Devlin said to Payton. 'Now. Make her laugh, even if you have to bribe her to do so.'

'An easy task. No bribe needed,' Payton said, just before he strode to Rachael.

Conversation flickered between them. Payton appeared wounded,

made a prayer clasp and then...victory, just as the people gathered for the first set started moving.

Watching them dance, Devlin wondered if Rachael might transfer her affections to his cousin and he hoped her wiser than that.

Payton's awareness of Rachael was merely a man's responsiveness to an appealing woman. Much like an insect might be called to a pretty flower.

Devlin detached himself from the surroundings. As Payton charmed Rachael, he wondered if he did the same. That if, in the initial aftermath of the accident, he'd committed himself to seeing that she was safe and it had merely carried on. It was definitely not a hardship.

Anyone would like Rachael. She had a big heart and her beauty radiated from within.

Then his attention latched on to Tenney and Tenney gave him the barest acknowledgement.

Devlin wondered that Tenney didn't quake in his boots if the man could read his mind, but then Tenney was possibly the most obtuse man on the planet. He couldn't even appreciate what a devoted wife Rachael would make.

Rachael promenaded between them as the dancers twirled.

At the end, Payton guided her from the dancers and straight to Tenney. That was not part of the plan. Devlin gritted his teeth.

Payton flashed his cousin a smile as he walked from the two and Devlin held up a fist, his crooked little finger extended. Payton laughed, raised his eyebrows and sauntered on, knowing Devlin could do nothing to him at such an event.

Devlin reminded himself it was not of his affair, but then the weasel spoke to Rachael and Devlin couldn't remain distant. Two long strides and he was beside them. He couldn't understand why he disliked Tenney so much, except that his methods were abominable. One did not discard a person after six years with a letter, particularly if there wasn't a continent between them. A short carriage ride was not a great hardship, surely.

Devlin took an extra second to observe Rachael after he stopped in front of them. 'Miss Albright. Mr Tenney.' He ended his words on an upbeat note. 'It is so fortunate to see you both.'

Then he frowned. 'Forgive my manners, Mr Tenney. I'm Viscount Montfort. And though it may seem we don't know each other, I do feel that I know you as well as I ever could. Miss Albright has told me so many things about you.'

'I didn't know you were acquainted.' The man's eyes, which did a good impression of a reptilian blink, took in Devlin. 'Kind of you to

say.'

Tenney could do with an adjustment to his nose. It was much too long and pointed. How dare he criticise Rachael for something so insignificant. Well, on Tenney's face, it was significant. Blasted thing was pointed straight at Rachael.

Rachael should thank the heavens she was not marrying Tenney. And, she didn't even have to concern herself about doing worse.

A silence surrounded them and, for Rachael's sake, Devlin ended it.

'And you, Miss Albright—' Devlin paused at just the right moment, giving himself the appearance of catching a faux pas. His voice softened. 'I only do not ask you for this next dance because I know the two of you will want to dance. Much to my chagrin.' Those words took his strength and he was surprised his teeth didn't shatter.

One reel was ending and another dance would start soon.

'Please. Do not let me keep you from dancing.'

Tenney studied Rachael before he held out his arm. After a brief second, she took it.

That would give her time to compose herself and get used to seeing that toad. Besides, two betrothed people should waltz and it would be noted if they didn't.

And Rachael could see how fortunate she would be not to be dancing with Tenney for the rest of her life.

Devlin watched them together. Rachael stared at Tenney's neckcloth. Then Devlin caught Payton's glance and his nod towards Rachael. His cousin doffed an imaginary hat to Devlin and Devlin decided he'd best leave the party for a short while. He spoke to the guests, each greeting winding him closer to the door, and made his way outside as if he were only going to talk with someone else.

He didn't want to make Rachael more nervous by watching her.

He found his carriage, discerned one of the drivers had wandered somewhere and the other's snores rumbled as his head had almost dipped into the neck of the waistcoat he wore while he still held the ribbons.

Bits of murmured conversations fluttered his way as some guests arrived and some left. The sounds of the horses nickering to each other. The creak as a carriage wheel turned. The drivers talking among themselves while they waited on their masters to finish the night. A bit of a ribald tale sounded, followed by guffaws.

The story was humorous and, he supposed, by the slurring of the man's words, ale had improved the flavour of it.

Life went on, as routinely as it always did, sprinkling happy and

sad, contentment and upheaval, and irritations and joys.

He wondered if Tenney might be one of the people who wallowed best in a pool of misery, unable to feel alive except when surrounded by misfortune.

Who knew? Who cared?

He walked over to the drivers of another carriage. He didn't even know who the vehicle belonged to. 'Like a cigar?' he asked.

One nodded and stepped to the ground. The other declined.

Devlin reached into an inside pocket of his frock coat, pulled out a cigar and gave it to the man. The man used the lantern hanging from the carriage to light it.

'Do you ever get tired of waiting for the night to end?' he asked the man.

The driver took a puff of the cigar. 'Not unless it's freezing cold. We have a few hours to take it easy. To peruse the stars. Jasper can fall asleep as soon as the carriage stops, and if he starts snoring, I wake him up out of pity for the horses. They can't rest with all the noise.'

Devlin didn't speak.

'Kinda nice to get a glance of the women's fripperies. The men acting bored by it all, but doubt they really are. Me, just sitting in my comfortable boots, getting to rest my legs. Share a drink with a few friends on occasion. Always a bottle somewhere about for a long night to go easier. This is my favourite part of my employment. A chance to attend a soirée and yet not dance or dress uncomfortable.'

The other one in the seat added his opinion. 'I like Mr Albright's soirées.'

The cigar ash flickered off as the man's head darted to his friend. Devlin expected if the light were better, he would have seen the man smoking give his friend a stern stare.

'Why?' Devlin asked.

Silence.

'Why?' Devlin wondered again.

'It's the family,' the one with the cigar admitted, the lighted end waving. 'Mrs Albright remembers us. Near the end of the night, the housekeeper sends a maid out with a bite to eat. Only time I ever had tarts with fripperies on it was at a party she'd had. Those little sprinkles of sweetness were almost too sweet, but they were good.'

'You hope never to leave early from here.' The one in the box spoke. 'And sometimes, a maid brings out a bottle of wine or two. She said the mistress of the house is pleased for her to do it. Makes the night pass more speedily.'

‘Then there was the juggler,’ the one with the cigar added. ‘I didn’t know a man could toss such things about. A few of the maids brought out torches and we stood about and watched. A sight it was.’

‘A juggler?’ He’d never dreamed of the night’s entertainment going out to give a performance for the staff.

‘Mr Albright can have a temper if things don’t go as he wishes, but he’s got a good heart,’ the other man said. ‘His temper is like a blustery storm that leaves calm. His staff say it’s a grand house to work in.’

‘Just like my staff say?’ Devlin asked. Devlin doubted his staff had ever stepped outside and said a word to the carriage drivers, but one never knew.

‘Absolutely. Of course.’ Both servants spoke in tandem.

‘Best house ever,’ the one with the cigar added.

Devlin hid his humour, assured the men had no idea who he was or which house was his, but it didn’t matter. The man speaking was a rake in his own way, Devlin supposed.

‘What do the staff say of the life behind closed doors here?’

‘Not a thing,’ the one with the cigar answered. ‘What goes on inside a house is sacred to all.’

‘I would well respect and appreciate that,’ Devlin said, valuing a good fabrication when he heard it. He would wager the servants shared many tales, but tact was required in employment.

He waited. ‘I wondered, if in this household, it is all a façade?’

‘Don’t think so,’ the man from the box said. ‘Least ways, don’t think it could be.’

‘It’s safe to say...’ The driver took a puff of the cigar and let the smoke drift into the night. ‘I would think it is safe to say, from just casual observation, that Mr and Mrs Albright are on the inside exactly as they are on the outside. They likely never get snappish with their carriage driver.’

The other one chuckled. ‘Except if a horse near steps on Mr Albright’s boot and then knocks him down. I expect a servant who let that happen might need a set down.’ Both men shared a glance and a chuckle.

‘So, it exists. True happiness in marriage.’

The end of the cigar brightened and nodded along with the speaker’s words. ‘But only in sparse quantities, if the tales of the other houses are to be believed. It is as if a happy bolt of lightning struck Mr and Mrs Albright and their servants reap the rewards. Sad Mr Albright might not be having many more events like this. It’s said he’s been a bit slow in payin’ some of the merchants.’

‘Did the contentment bolt strike any other household in London?’ Devlin asked after considering what the man said.

The man with the cigar laughed. ‘Many of them have good lives—happy lives—but a bigger amount are more sad than happy even with all the fripperies they can purchase. Some of them must get enjoyment out of being cross.’

The man then scratched his chest. ‘Hard to tell who has it the best, us on the outside or them on the inside. That lightning bolt don’t know the difference between a man with a heavy purse and a man with no purse who has food. Just seems to strike and miss at random.’

Devlin gave a light tap to the man’s arm. ‘Well, I’d best return to this event.’

‘And who be you?’ the smoker asked.

Devlin paused. ‘One that was struck by a confused bolt of lightning, I’d say.’

The man chuckled. ‘Was nice tongue-wagging with you.’

Devlin had to return to the house, pleased he’d stepped outside.

Mrs Albright likely knew exactly how the staff enjoyed the night. Devlin didn’t know whether to be disappointed or impressed that the Albrights’ exterior ran deeper than the surface, or sad that he wasn’t sure how deep his own interior ran.

He had no gift for numbers like his father and Payton had. No deep love of politics. No true affection for gambling. The only skill he had was to jest without making people angry. He could say what everyone else was thinking, but say it in such a way as to remain friends with everyone afterwards.

He didn’t really understand it and wouldn’t have paid attention except Payton, who had inherited the family mathematical brain, but chose to hide it, had commented on it in exasperation. Devlin had once convinced two men who were ready to go at each other’s throats that a nonsensical competition would be in order and the night had ended with laughter.

A useful skill that Payton had grumbled about, but insisted Devlin accompany him on one particular occasion when he was short of funds. He’d claimed that with Devlin’s charm and his mathematical abilities, they could have been the best swindlers in London.

Devlin had chastised his cousin for thinking such foolhardiness, but was curious.

Later that night, everyone joined in the wager Devlin had started, even though it was obvious by then that Payton had a winning hand. Somehow, Devlin had convinced the players the sport wasn’t in the game, but in betting against Payton. Payton had left

whistling, with his pockets full.

If Devlin hadn't seen it, he wouldn't have believed it. It was as if the people had wagered without caring whether they won as long as Devlin kept the banter going.

The music rose from inside the house, diverting Devlin's attention.

He hoped he had never been such a cad as Tenney was. True, he knew several women had envisioned themselves in love with him, but he had been honest when those quiet sentiments arose and the words of their love tumbled out. He'd always given a kiss and told them that it wasn't true feelings they felt, only intensity caused by the closeness they'd had together. He'd extricated himself faster than Payton could count.

One mistake had taught him.

He'd not even lost their friendships over the word love. But once he heard it, he never saw the women in the same light as he had before. He trod lightly around them, and he knew they'd somehow understood it was nothing personal, it was just the way of things. It was better for all concerned for both of them to drift apart.

Devlin stilled, wondering if those women who'd said they loved him had only listened to his words of sweetness and never saw beneath the exterior. That was a wager his cousin would take and fill his coffers.

Rachael had listened to his declarations, but didn't fall for them as the others did. She likely wouldn't have wagered against Payton in the betting game.

Tenney would have lost a lot of funds this night. He wasn't gambling on the right deck of cards.

Tenney had decided, for whatever reason, that Rachael was not the wife for a barrister, and he had possibly found someone who he believed might make a better wife to advance him. A daughter of someone who could promote his career. Someone other than Rachael.

Ambition was not a bad thing.

But a house shouldn't be built on it.

Rachael was so much better off—assuming she did not get attached to someone worse.

Then he remembered Payton asking Rachael to dance and the adoration in his eyes. Payton fell deeply, passionately in love for all of a night and fell out even faster. He said love couldn't be counted with numbers, therefore it was a figment of the imagination, but he liked to use his imagination. An imagination, he claimed, best exercised.

Blast. He'd better get inside. He didn't want Payton aware of Rachael when she decided to get over Tenney. She wouldn't have improved her situation.

Frowning, he walked into the house. Rachael might need him and he would happily throttle Tenney for her.



## *Chapter Eight*

The music ebbed and flowed around them, much like Rachael felt her stomach was doing. There was not another person on the face of the earth Rachael would have wanted less to be dancing with than dear Ambrose and her burn ached from all the dancing.

Not only that, she had suddenly taken a strong dislike to the overpowering scent that Tenney always sported.

‘I hope my honest letter did not upset you.’ Tenney took her hand, lifting it as the music for the waltz began.

Well, that answered any doubt she might have had about someone else writing the letter.

She took a deep breath before answering.

‘At first it did,’ Rachael admitted. ‘But then I decided that the strain of taking on a wife might be wearing on you. And you didn’t mean any of it. That you’d likely changed your mind, but it was too late to recall the words.’

She’d told herself that to keep from hating him.

He led her away from the other dancers. His voice was soft. ‘I meant every word. You have none of the finer qualities I seek in a wife...like some do. You’ve put me off for years now and I am ready to wed. And when I compare you to others, I immediately discern how you, a glorified merchant’s daughter, have not blossomed into your potential.’

She had once stood outside under the eaves on a wintery day. Snow had been on the roof. Someone had slammed a door and suddenly snow had slid from the roof and coated her head in moisture. Tenney’s words covered her the same way.

They danced on and she knew how it would have been for Wellington and Bonaparte to dance together to a funeral dirge. Only they would have respected each other so much more.

‘I am so sorry you feel that way,’ she said. ‘I have waited some years to marry you. It is as if we were already married in my parents’ eyes. Now you think you don’t wish to marry me. Six years we have courted. I’m irritated.’

Irritated in that she would have liked to have put him under the snowdrift on an eave and slammed a door. With him lying in the snow, face up. And with icicles on the roof, melting.

He gave a one-shouldered shrug within the dance and her words

rolled off him much easier than the snow had melted on her face.

‘You could not have informed me of this earlier instead of telling me you were waiting until you could afford a wife and family?’

‘Husbands who don’t wish to be married can be rough on their wives.’ He gave a long slow blink, much as a duellist might cock the hammer on a gun. ‘It is in your best interest to call the wedding off.’

She suddenly remembered his joy when he’d told her of his uncle settling a plump sum on him so he could purchase a house for them. The money had arrived for Tenney, but he had yet to find the perfect house that would suit them.

‘Will you return the funds to your uncle?’

He batted the question into nonsense with a blink. ‘It is too late. I’ve purchased a house. But you will not be living in it. I do not intend to share one window with you. It is not in your best interest to pursue a marriage with me. Unless you are a bigger imbecile than I think.’

He had a way with his statements just as Devlin did, but in his case, he made people’s stomachs roil without effort.

Music wafted around them so peacefully, everything seemed as normal as it should and she imagined a few more, bigger, icicles on a roof.

He’d just given her one more reason for needing her to call off the wedding. His uncle would likely understand Ambrose keeping the house if she didn’t wish to wed him, feeling empathy for his nephew.

She searched her mind for the proper set down for him, but none in her vocabulary suited.

‘In truth, I will not take one penny from you, Mr Tenney—Ambrose. I am my father’s heir and he will ensure that I am provided for. I just cannot tell my family at this time as they will be inquisitive. I must have time to absorb the news. It would not do to burst into tears at a question.’

‘Nonsense,’ Tenney said. ‘It is a feeble excuse in that you wish to grapple with me and try to get a settlement price from me.’

‘No. I will take nothing from you.’

‘That will change,’ Tenney said. ‘Your father’s jewellery business is going bankrupt. The shops are, at best, wavering. It is only a matter of time before the creditors take them. You misled me about your station in life. You plainly deceived me.’

‘I did no such thing.’ Rachael stopped moving, but he gave her a tug and pulled her along with him.

Rachael used all her strength to keep moving and could spare none to speak. Surely Tenney lied about her father. Her father had

mentioned economising on occasion, but never with a sense of urgency. Then she recalled the memory of her father's tightened lips when her mother spoke of a dowry.

She caught a sparkle of smug assurance in Tenney's eyes as he studied her expression.

The music ended, and Tenney led her from the floor without another word.

'If you wish for the marriage to be called off, Mr Tenney, I will do so.' Her words were soft so that no one else could hear, but she could not keep the frost from them, and she had no ability to smile as Devlin did. 'Sooner. Not later. You merely had to request what you wished for. Tonight is not the night. My entire family is here and I cannot bear to have them all question or commiserate. The night my mother worked so hard for will be ruined. Even a countess is here and that is a first for Mother. This is an important night for her. I cannot spoil it.'

'That is your problem. I cannot take on a wife with no prospects and I refuse to let this betrothal continue. You will only use the length of it to punish me in a legal action. One second more is too long for this to continue. You will end it. And tonight.'

'No. I will not. If you continue the charade tonight, I will send you a letter that plainly states I am calling the wedding off.'

'It is in your best interest.'

'Miss Albright.' A voice rumbled behind her, caressing in its tone. She turned, almost falling into Devlin.

'May I have the next dance?' He put out a hand to stop her from tumbling against him. 'And might I say, you have the loveliest nose I have ever seen.' He held out his arm.

Tenney gasped and she saw him reach for her, but she stepped aside.

She spoke to Devlin. 'And might I say, you have the best manners I have ever seen.'

'You deserve the best, Miss Albright.'

She let him lead her to the furthestmost area from Tenney. 'I fear I haven't had that in the past.'

Devlin didn't speak. His jawline appeared to be made of granite and his eyes even harder.

'But can we please not dance? I would prefer to stand still.'

'I hope he chokes on his own stench. He has doused himself in some shaving soap that only vermin could survive, which explains how he is still upright.'

'It doesn't matter,' she said. 'None of it does now. It's over.'

'What a waste of an education. What a waste of a human. What a

waste of a nose.'

'I'm not going to miss him as much as I conceived.' She shuddered. 'You were right. I will not miss him at all.' She put a palm to her forehead. 'I will only question my judgement.'

'He is nothing more than a shrivelled stinkhorn mushroom.'

'He is much worse than any toadstool.'

Devlin paused. 'I agree.'

'Tenney and I have been acquainted a long time and it can't have been easy for him. I will say a kind word for him in my prayers if I can think of any. Perhaps that he live a long and wintery life with many icicles to keep him warm, although no mushrooms survive the cold.'

'The stinkhorn does.'

Rachael stared at Devlin. She didn't think she'd ever seen a toadstool in the wintertime, but then, she didn't go out looking for them and she'd never heard of a stinkhorn mushroom before, but the name fit. He always wore an overabundant amount of scent.

'I assure you, Rachael. You are better off without him.'

'You're right.' She turned to him. 'I feel lighter. This has weighed on me the past few days.'

She considered what she would tell her parents the next morning and ask her mother to share it with a few close friends who weren't known for discretion.

'He's a fungus,' Devlin muttered.

She brightened. 'Thank you for understanding that it has been difficult for me. I feel so much better that you have been here tonight to bolster me up.'

Devlin stopped, repeating her words. 'Bolster you up?'

'Yes. You always know what to say to make me feel better about the end of the betrothal. Tomorrow I will tell Mother that tonight Mr Tenney and I both agreed we have grown apart. I cannot say we are still friends. I can't. But it must get about that I am no longer betrothed and that it was a decision on my part. He fears I'll attempt a breach of promise and I won't do that. He's also concerned his uncle will want the funds replaced for a house that Ambrose purchased.'

She suspected the dwelling had a lot to do with Ambrose's timing. With the residence, he would be better positioned to approach unmarried women.

'I'm surprised that he didn't trust me enough to have a conversation with me. I would never subject him to a breach of promise suit. An ice storm, perhaps.'

'That is solicitous of you,' he said as the next dance began and

they stood near the musicians, but where they could watch everyone. 'I would be happy to bestow an ice storm upon him if I had the power. But really, does ice bother mushrooms or are they already trampled underfoot by women with discerning and beautifully shaped noses?'

'Perhaps only one nose per woman?' she asked, imagining a woman with three noses stomping a low-growing Tenney-faced weed into the ground. She laughed.

Tenney must have recognised the laugh because his face darted in her direction, before he gave a glare and left.

'You are making this much easier,' she said to Devlin.

'At your service. Any time you need to rid yourself of a defective sweetheart, find me.'

'Hopefully, never again. Never.'

The music commenced for another dance.

'Tomorrow I will tell my parents,' she said. 'Then Mother will tell my aunts and cousins. It will be easy to explain to her that after I saw him tonight, I felt no affection.'

The world had not ended. She would be a spinster, but she would develop a pastime. Something that made the world better, or at least, made her feel better.

She remembered Tenney's comment that her father's business was in financial distress. She hoped it was another of his imaginations. Surely it was. But if he believed her impoverished and no longer wished to marry her because of her lack of funds...

Devlin watched her, concern in his face, and that erased the feeling of being spurned.

'You have befriended me at the time I needed it most,' she said. 'Your cousin reports you are an exemplary friend who could soothe over a windstorm and turn it into dust. It's true.'

Devlin didn't answer.

She compared his jaw to Tenney's, which always seemed smooth and soft. Devlin had been dishevelled in the library, nearly sporting a beard, but on him, it only made him more endearing.

She noticed the crisp starch of freshly laundered clothing, a hint of another soft soap that he'd perhaps used on his hair and a gentle leather scent. The delicate fragrance around him only contrasted against his strength.

'I believe I would like to do something risqué,' she said.

His brows lifted and her chin went up.

'Yes.' She felt daring and imagined she could combine her maturity and the spinster. 'I believe I will have another glass of punch.'

‘Dare you be so foolhardy?’ he asked.

‘You’ve not tasted the punch. It’s more potent than the wine.’

‘I would be honoured to dance with you, Rachael, and help you show your daring side to the world. Are you sure you would not consider it now that Tenney has left? A waltz?’

‘Perhaps something more respectable?’

Humour flashed across his face.

‘It is just because Mother informed the musicians they must keep the waltzes to a minimum and they will not play another one.’

‘Then we will take our chances with whatever music they play.’

Ending the night by dancing with Devlin helped her consider herself precious instead of rejected. His ire somehow made her feel protected, more feminine and without the many defects Tenney had listed.

She caught her reflection in a mirror and examined her nose. Nothing was wrong with it. Tenney was a liar.

Devlin must have been watching her. ‘It has not grown this evening. I promise I will let you know if it swells or takes flight. And if you should have three, I will kiss the tip of each one.’

Her eyes brightened. ‘I would let you.’

Devlin’s lips turned up with soft laughter and his head dipped just a touch in acknowledgement of the private bond between them and it was as if they had kissed.

For such a disastrous night, she was surprised at how much better she felt.

But then she noticed Tenney had returned and was watching them. He huffed and stalked out of the door. In that instant, she remembered how vengeful he could be.

## Chapter Nine

With fashion plates spread before her and her mother standing at her shoulder, the time would never be better. She filled her lungs and the words burst out of her. 'Mr Tenney and I will not wed.'

Her mother's rings flashed as she clasped her hands. 'Oh.'

Rachael bit the inside of her lip.

'So that is why you became distressed after you received the post at the Countess's?' her mother asked.

'Yes. I don't want to even be near him again. It was almost a game I was playing...being in love.' She traced her fingertip over the costly ballgown she would never wear. 'I missed him when he left. I waited for each letter. I read them time and time again. I would have married him.'

'Are you positive it's over?'

'I posted a kind letter to him today calling it off. It is in my handwriting and he will have proof I will not consider a breach of promise suit.'

Mrs Albright threw up her hands. 'My daughter. She sends the man verification to reassure him after she waits for him for six—six—six and a half years.'

Rachael felt she was in the lull before the storm, but in this case it was after. Her mother hadn't reacted with dismay as she'd expected.

'Are you returning the ring?' her mother asked. 'Promise me you will do the right thing and return the...object.'

'Of course. I sent it to him with the letter this morning.' She shut her eyes. 'It never fitted properly on my finger. I kept studying it, wondering how his relative could have tolerated such an atrocity.'

'Your heart may have been telling you that the two of you weren't suited.'

Rachael stared at her mother. 'Would you want the stone?'

'No. The person who cut that rock could never work for your father. The flaw was sizeable. And the colour?' She shuddered. 'It proved your fondness for him that you liked it. Besides, he smelled rather like a bottle of medicine. Not the good medicine, either.'

'That I tolerated the flawed gemstone was the indication I cared for him.'

'Perhaps the first three years. I'd say you tolerated *him* after that.'

Love is a jewel in its own right. And in Tenney's case, a defective one.'

'With inferior metal.'

Her mother smiled. At that moment, Rachael accepted that her mother hadn't been fond of Tenney and was pleased to see him go. It had never entered Rachael's mind that her mother might be happy about a broken betrothal.

'Not to mention he liked the idea of having the shops,' Mrs Albright said. 'He did comment on the nice lodgings above it for the Grimsleys and wondered about the rent per annum. We are fortunate that the Grimsleys work for us. They are such dears.'

Inwardly, Rachael flinched. If Tenney had determined he was getting a thriving business, but then heard it wasn't...perhaps he had never cared for her at all. Perhaps, for six years, she'd been duped. And perhaps he knew what he was speaking of when he said that her father's finances were faulty.

Rachael refused to ask her mother if their finances weren't doing well. Besides, she wouldn't know. Only her father would. And Mr Grimsley, but likely he would consider it disloyal to speak with her about such a thing without her father's blessing.

'Does your father know that you are calling the betrothal off?'

'No. I'll tell him tonight. Will you tell the cousins?'

Her mother nodded. 'And I will inform them that is why you never set a date for the marriage. Deep inside, you knew he wasn't right for you.'

'That might not be honest.'

'Then I will tell them that we are just extremely fortunate that you did not set a date for the marriage. And I will say that I suspected many times he wasn't right for you. It will not be a lie.'

Rachael examined the ring on her forefinger. One of her grandmother's many gems she and her sister had inherited. It felt good to wear the heirloom. 'At first, I was disappointed and I'm still hurt, but it is for the best. I will be happy to be a shop owner's daughter.'

She remembered Tenney's words about her father's business, and how, of late, her father often seemed preoccupied.

She'd even heard him ask her mother about the cost of the soirée and he'd chewed his lip after she answered, but he'd assured her that no price was too much for his family to be happy.

An overwhelming loneliness engulfed her. She turned her head so her mother couldn't perceive the tears in her eyes, but her mother wasn't fooled.

Her mother bent to hug Rachael. 'He's not worth crying over.'



‘I know,’ she said, but she wasn’t sure if the words were true. It wasn’t Mr Tenney she missed. But Devlin.

She’d not anticipated that removing Ambrose from her life would take out Devlin as well.

Devlin sat at his breakfast table, sipped his tea and half-listened to the Baron go on about his latest love. He pretended to read the paper and only spoke at the longest pauses Bomford delivered. The ones after he recounted something particularly lovely about Priscilla. Devlin wished the Baron would sometimes think before he fell in love. If only for half an hour. Less even. The time it took to turn the page on a newspaper.

Bomford was deeply in love with Priscilla and recounting her qualities, both of them, ad infinitum.

‘Do you think you are falling in love with her excess of bosom?’ Devlin glanced over the top of the paper and asked. Just asked, then he noted, ‘It’s hard to miss her. She tends to flutter about and reminds me of a loud bird.’

A true statement. Terribly unkind and he felt a cad for saying the most offensive thing he could think of. A test of his ability not to anger. He wanted to be certain he was not deluding himself in believing he could soothe almost any statement. Yet, it was important for him to know if he did have a skill he’d not grasped and which he’d taken for granted.

But, by the equanimity on Bomford’s face, Devlin could see no offence was taken. He wondered if he had a calming voice, an inflection of tone, or a skill of making an observation at the right moment that took the sting out of whatever words he might utter.

‘She cannot alter her bosom.’ Bomford smiled. ‘And she is a swan in a pool of lesser birds. If few men with substance have been fascinated by her, then it is time one did. I am pleased you understand that. Poor woman. I must be more cautious with her, to have been troubled with so many ill-guided attentions.’

Devlin shrugged. He could speak the truth and no one even held him at fault. He’d heard the phrase *silver-tongued* before and it hadn’t entered his mind that it could possibly apply to him, or that he had a rare ability to speak without offending.

He turned the page of the newspaper, then looked over the top again. ‘Do you think you have been quick to fall in love? Perhaps not really thinking?’

The Baron gazed into the distance. ‘Good on you to watch out for your old friend, Devlin. Yes. I have. Now I can reflect on it. I will discuss it with Priscilla and find out what she thinks. Perhaps she and I will be able to find solace in each other’s arms. I may

propose.'

Devlin returned to reading the paper. 'You're being rash.'

The Baron nodded. 'I suppose so. Both Priscilla and I have been alone for so long. It is time we both found happiness.'

The paper rustled as Devlin again turned the page. Well, perhaps Bomford and Priscilla were well suited for each other. Yes, he decided, they were.

Payton walked in. He had a folded newspaper and he used it to tap Devlin on the shoulder.

'Oh. You've got a copy,' Payton noted. 'Surprised you're not angry. Just anticipated you might be.'

'What are you talking about?'

'The newsprint.' Then he noticed the paper Devlin read. 'Oh. Wrong one. You're reading *The Times*.' He shrugged. 'A wasted life, yours. This auspicious one has all the latest scandals.'

Devlin cleared his throat and glared at his cousin. 'You are an idler.'

Payton laughed. 'You're correct. I'm right there with you.'

Damn. Perhaps no one took him seriously.

Payton opened his paper. 'The night that Miss Albright danced with Tenney, it's said that a lot more was happening. It's said she only had eyes for a particular viscount,' Payton continued. 'Tenney was deeply distraught. I am not even mentioned and she spoke some time with me. Guess one's not important if one doesn't have a title.'

Devlin held out a hand for the paper and Payton released it.

He spoke to the Baron. 'It seems Miss Albright has spurned Mr Tenney's devoted attentions after a friend alerted him she is becoming loose with said affections. He discovered it to be true, according to this friend who is not named.' He touched his chest and his voice took on overblown innocence. 'Who suspected she could be...attached to anyone but this Tenney?'

Each word Devlin read seized him, strangling his voice. He had to crumple the paper before he could speak. 'It is not true and you know it. It is a malicious lie.'

'I don't believe Miss Albright is the fickle shrew she is painted in the story, but the paper reports it is to Tenney's great relief that she has called off the betrothal. It seems she dragged it along only planning to keep him until he was well established and so her settlement in a breach of promise would be more. It's said she acted outrageously at an earlier night and her flagrant behaviour may have resulted in an altercation between two men, causing a fire.'

'Tripe.'

‘How do you know?’ Bomford’s eyes narrowed. ‘And who was she dallying with that caused the fire?’

Devlin leapt to his feet, scraping the chair over the floor. ‘I was there that night. So were you. You blasted set her on fire.’

‘Oh, *that* fire. No lasting harm done. Priscilla said I was heroic moving everyone aside and putting out the edges of the inferno. Appreciated your support, Dev.’

Devlin pointed to the paper. ‘Read what is said about her. That cad wanted to break off. She is doing the noble thing. Making it easy for him. This is what she gets. Painted like a strumpet for the world to peruse, and faithless as well. He wants to destroy her.’

‘How do you know Mr Tenney wanted to break off with her?’ Payton asked.

‘Because she told me,’ Devlin said, whirling to frown at his cousin.

Bomford and Payton shared a quick glance and a grin.

‘Ah,’ the Baron said. ‘The sparks are between Miss Albright and Dev. I did detect they couldn’t take their eyes off each other.’

Damn. He could grab them both by the neck and bounce their heads together and they would not be angry with him or see what was in front of them. Rachael was being destroyed and only he could see the tragedy.

‘Unusual for you to get so upset over a woman,’ Payton said. ‘And you never did make it to the lodge when she was recovering at your house.’

‘He didn’t, did he? Devlin is our mystery viscount.’ The Baron chuckled. ‘I will have to tell Priscilla.’

Devlin glared at them for a second. ‘You’re both wrong. But even if you were both right, it doesn’t matter. The mushroom of a man is not worthy of her.’

Devlin stalked out of the room. He intended to go straight to Tenney and demand that he set the record straight.

Outside the door, he stopped.

He didn’t know where Tenney lived.

But he did know where Rachael lived. He would have to find her and get the stinkhorn’s address.

Devlin strode through the doorway, and passed the servant who’d led him to the sitting room where she and her mother sat.

‘May I speak with your daughter alone?’ Devlin asked, holding up the crumpled newsprint. He noticed that some of the ink had stained his hands. Fitting.

Her mother gave Rachael a questioning glance. ‘But—I don’t know if her father would approve.’

‘I’m sure he wouldn’t mind,’ Devlin said. ‘I want to discuss Mr Tenney with her. She needs to know what a...questionable *mushroom* he is. The poisonous kind.’

‘Tenney? A mushroom?’ Her mother rose, but remained in place, studying the situation. ‘I would think him more a snail.’

‘I would like to speak with Rachael. Alone, if you will approve?’ He’d not meant to call her by her first name, but the word was already out of his mouth.

He expected her mother to argue, but instead, she beamed. ‘Well, in that case, I will leave you two. Do take care.’

She bustled out.

‘What is wrong with you?’ Rachael asked. ‘Now Mother likely thinks you are the reason for the betrothal to end.’

‘You can tell her the truth later.’ He paced across the room and then returned to his original position.

‘Tenney is—he is unconscionable. He has spoken about you to the newspaper.’

Her mouth opened, but she didn’t speak. ‘And I sent him the nicest letter after Mother’s soiree calling off the betrothal.’

He paced three steps. ‘That was blasted considerate of you. I’d like to send him to an undertaker. Better yet, a body snatcher.’ He held the paper out. ‘Read this.’

She hesitated, then took the paper. She braced herself before she straightened it. She didn’t even want his name mentioned in her presence and, from Devlin’s manner, she wasn’t going to like what she read.

She held the print and at first it was as incomprehensible as the letter from Tenney. She read through twice, the second time studying each sentence before she accepted the words in front of her.

She collapsed into the chair, clenching the paper. She didn’t want to believe it. Just like she hadn’t wanted the letter to be true.

‘You’ve done absolutely nothing to deserve this. Nothing. You did exactly as he wanted. You dissolved the betrothal. Yet he painted you as a conniving woman who used him to further yourself.’

‘How did—? Even if he hated me, I can’t believe he would do this. I presumed he cared for my parents. They welcomed him into our home. This will be so painful for them.’ She held the paper in front of her. ‘They’ll be so upset. And he had to have initiated this. He had to have.’

‘This is a bigger blow than just a slap to the face. It can hurt your father’s business if people connect you to the ventures and question your integrity.’

'No one can doubt the value of the items we sell. The silver goods are marked carefully and the tariffs paid.'

'Oh, they can. Even if they merely question your honesty, it cannot benefit and can only damage your family.'

Her body deflated. It felt as if her future had been pulled from her, leaving nothing behind but an empty woman who must always pretend everything was glorious.

Devlin seized the paper from her hands and tossed it to the floor. He lifted her to her feet, with all the care of lifting the most prized artwork in the world. 'I will not challenge him to a duel. I will grab him by the scruff of the neck and take him to the newspaper offices and demand that he tell the truth. He cannot do this to you.'

She took Devlin's sleeves. 'It will do no good. It will only make the matter worse.' She shook her head. 'Besides, think of our mothers. Yours and mine. Anything you do will only make the scandal bigger and will embarrass them.'

'I want his words to blow up in his face.'

'You can't fight with Tenney. It will not help my reputation. Imagine the tongues wagging. *Well, we know the paper was right about why she broke things off.*'

'The letter you have,' Devlin said. 'It's in his handwriting. It shows the truth of him. No man worth his spit would do something like that. Let me have it. I will show it around at the club and before long all the wives and sweethearts will know. A version of it will likely end up being in the newspaper.'

She put her cupped fingers over her nose. 'No. I cannot. Don't defend me. It could go so wrong. I will be the centre of attention. All eyes will be on me—and on my face.'

'Then let me handle it quietly. I will pound him small enough to fit into a snuffbox if he doesn't tell the truth.'

'It's my fault as well.' She turned, eyes hidden. 'He changed. I've examined his letters, particularly the last ones, and I can see it now.'

His jaw dropped. 'You were rereading letters from him?'

'Yes. It's been on my mind. Why he did that. Why he could not discuss it with me first. But now I can accept what I missed. Because I did not yearn for him and miss him when we weren't together, it didn't seem odd to me that he was the same. Perhaps he felt he could not broach the subject with me.'

'You are making excuses for him. I want to throttle him and you want to ignore his disloyalty.' He shook his head, as if slinging poison from his mind. 'You have to tell your side. Or let me tell it for you. If anyone can smooth this over and make you come out

smelling like flowers in springtime, I can.'

'I can't. I can't let you solve this for me. It's too new. Too painful. I'm humiliated.'

Devlin couldn't understand her logic. How could she feel humiliated? How? She had done nothing wrong.

She had to let him take care of this.

He had a weapon—his easy-going smile—and it would work wonders for her. His experience with being a rake would stand her in good stead. He could stir up so much support for her with a soft word dropped here, a question there.

Damn. With just a smile and a raised eyebrow at the right places, he could probably drag Tenney through more mud than the man had ever seen.

Rachael didn't grasp the situation. She had the proof in black and white of Tenney's perfidy, yet she didn't accept it. She was too gentle-hearted.

A statuette caught his eye, a butterfly, suspended glass baubles reflecting the sunlight of the window.

'You do not understand that you're supposed to be a butterfly,' he said.

Her eyes narrowed. 'Butterfly?'

'Yes. You're the beauty of the world. To be protected. Cherished. Adored. To nurture in return.'

'No. I have feet and arms instead of wings. I am created to work.'

'Isn't it much more pleasant to be an object of veneration?' he asked, wondering, and thinking it would bring her all the joy she would ever need.

Light he'd not seen before shone on her face. 'I will work.'

He waited, returning his perusal to the glass baubles. Letting the silence in the room grow.

'I want—What I really want—is—Late in the night while I was reading the letters over and over, my father noticed I was awake and was concerned. I confided that I wasn't to marry. I explained that I had changed my mind. He was crushed. I cried when I saw that and I begged him to let me have more to do with the jewellery he sells to take my mind from the fact that I'm never to wed. At first he refused, then he told me the truth of the finances. He said there may be nothing left there for me.'

'You need to consider that. A husband's funds can save you.'

'I may remain a spinster.' Her chin went high. 'I see nothing wrong with that.'

'Neither do I. It was a statement.'

'Didn't sound nice.' She glared at him, her voice tense. 'You don't

think I'm capable of handling business matters and I should marry so I won't starve.' She shook her head. 'And you are the one who told me that a match with a disparaging person would be like wearing good shoes with thorns in them.'

Her irritation shocked him, and he couldn't speak. He'd meant nothing unpleasant by his comment, only having concern for her future, and she was upset.

He studied her. Yes, even her eyes were a little pinched. Those beautiful, expressive eyes that he could gaze into for hours.

Instantly, he stopped the direction of his imaginings. He was thinking like a heartsore spinster himself. He coughed, pulling himself into reality.

'It was meant as a sincere, respectful comment. The business might fail. You will have no way of supporting yourself if it does. If you marry, a husband's assistance can be vital.'

'Right now, that isn't in my future. A silver and jewellery shop in London is. The small structure which sells goods in Manchester and has rooms above it. And two ventures in Bath and I want to make the best of them.'

'Then aid your father within the constraints of society. You cannot afford to let your name be tarnished in the paper. You cannot. Don't sit by and watch the business dwindle into nothing.'

He walked over and picked up the fashion-plate magazine. 'If you are not going to flutter about and pursue a courtship, then you'll have to take on more work. You'll have to be an ambassador for your family endeavours. My father attends events and, often as not, during the night a word or two of business is discussed that he acts on later. Perhaps a question is asked or a new idea is presented and the others give their opinions on it.'

'That doesn't sound like a relaxing night.'

'It is, to them. They are with friends, discussing what can go right and what can go wrong and why things work the way they do. I suppose it is much like mothers might enjoy discussing their children. The men are discussing their workday babies. The way they spend their daytime hours.'

For a moment, he'd forgotten who he was and when he remembered the ease returned to his face. He held a hand out, planning to touch her arm in a reassuring caress. He stopped just before he held her.

Devil take it, she must have the sort of charm he had, only hers worked on him, pulling him to her. Wrapping him up in her eyes and causing him to forget everything but comforting and being close to her.

He had to remain in control of himself. He couldn't let two alluring eyes, a perfect nose and luscious lips distract him. He was not a youth glancing at an attractive woman, yet he was unable to distance himself from an awareness of her.

'Let's sit,' he said and, instead of an embrace, he guided her to the sofa and sat beside her. As he sat beside her, a feeling of peace invaded him. He wondered if Rachael somehow did for him what he did for others.

His mind fastened on the image of her in his arms. It would not be the same as holding any of the fragile butterflies. Deep within, he knew he missed something vital by not clasping her, but she was too injured. He could not take advantage of her when she was in pain. He would not use someone's heart to manipulate them.

He wanted to comfort her, but holding her would only be diverting her from her problem. It wouldn't be benefiting her at all. It might be damaging.

He directed all his attention on what she needed.

'What is your plan?' he asked.

'I am to have a business. Jewellery would not have been my first choice, but it is what is in front of me. I am to take care of myself. I don't wish to spend my days getting my hair pulled and twisted and filled with so much hair dressing that my scalp is sore when it is being washed out, while my father is worrying about how he will afford the maid for me.'

'You know that life is a game,' he said. 'That's what it must be to have some happiness.'

Happiness. Deep in the pit of his stomach, a nagging feeling reminded him he might not comprehend his own feelings, but only how to create solace for others. A touch of anger replaced the doubt and then he shoved it aside, knowing he must soothe Rachael.

He opened the periodical to a page and randomly glanced through it, a smile on his lips. 'This is a military catalogue for women.'

She let a whisper of breath flow through her teeth before speaking. 'You are a rake. It is a game to you. To me it has to be more. I must gather all my wits and duck my head and work as hard as I can. My security will depend on it. I can't spend my parents' limited resources on frivolities.'

'It's more than that.'

'It's more? Dances and drinking and gambling? You have the most fortunate life of all. To be the heir.'

'It is my role. I am happy that it suits me well. I represent my family, although it is not seen that way. If my father makes a



misstep, and he has on many occasions—he doesn't get on well with my mother—sometimes word gets about that he has a new sweetheart and then I am there to make a bit of laughter. *It's the way of the Bryan family. For centuries*, I say at the club. I laugh it off. I might shake my head, but I make light of it.'

'It's terribly wrong of your father and you shouldn't jest it away.'

'I can't make it go away. But I can make light of it. When I see my mother, I twirl her around and tell her she is the best mother in the world. That we are indeed blessed to have her. She glows with happiness and I tell her tall tales to make her laugh. I am the rakish, wayward ambassador for my family. I duel in jests, dancing, gambling and whatever else that will make the world lighter.' He rose, lifted the magazine again, frowned at the cover and then held it up to her. 'And you must be the same. With soirée dresses. With smiles.'

She shook her head.

He tossed the periodical to the table, letting it slap the wood. 'You have a man of affairs to handle the business of the day. You need to increase the customers. Let the man of affairs work with the numbers. You send the people to him.'

'I can understand numbers,' she said. 'Eventually. I will get a tutor if need be. I want to absorb what goes on behind the curtain. Why some endeavours fail and others succeed.'

He felt he was trying to tell her that very thing, but she had to believe it also. 'Calculate the true figures, Rachael. Mr Tenney just made a jab at your profits. I'm sure he was only wanting to protect his own reputation and finances. He didn't give a jot about yours.'

She must understand how precarious her financial future was. She mustn't be forced to marry someone because the roof was leaking, the larders were empty and her mother was hungry.

'In society, right now Tenney will not turn the other cheek and wish you well. He now holds a grudge against you. It is the way of people like him. Rise above. Rise above so you can drop the contents of a chamber pot on his head. A chamber pot filled with coins. When the night is long and you are tired of the dancing, remember Tenney and keep moving.'

She stood. 'Society doesn't fit me. They don't want me.'

'Build a bridge into it one smile at a time.'

'I don't feel like smiling.'

'Do it anyway. It's comforting to others. I seem to be able to say what I think and people don't hold it against me. In fact, it seems as though I can say rather straightforward comments and get praise because I have no animosity in my voice. It's my haphazard

observation, not criticism. And presented as a jest we're all in on.'

'You flash a smile and people forgive you.'

'A smile can get a person far. I'm proof of that, I believe,' he said. 'It is a useful tool. I've used it many times.'

'Do you?'

'Absolutely. I build on success. The lessons...who would want lessons to learn more? I would rather learn from the people around me and discover what life has taught them. They are my studies.'

'You must have been a terrible student to your tutors.'

'No. They loved me. I wanted to do well so I asked questions and left the studies alone. I told them I might need their knowledge in my estate management some day and they tried to make the way easier for me.'

'Why not both the books and the tutors?'

'Would you say to a songbird perhaps don't spend so much time making the world happier with your music, But endeavour to wake up people in the morning like the cockerel does? And then would you ask the cockerel to sing for us so that he may be a better chicken?'

'You are adept at speaking nonsense.' Her upper lip tightened.

'You must control yourself, Rachael, and not try to be so obviously sensible. Life does not always make sense to the kind-hearted. In fact, the opposite may be true.'

She looked at the ceiling and then at him. 'I will try to be more nonsensical around you.'

'Yes. If you must think, please do so early in the day. Get it over with quickly so you can enjoy the remaining hours better. The people at the dances don't want you to show them how intelligent you are, they want you to listen to them. That is the secret. Ask them the questions to get the answers they want to share.'

Without his awareness, they had moved closer and closer, and now they were inches apart, connected and separated by the tensions that smouldered within.

He'd never stood so close to a woman and felt so much without them touching.

For the second time in an hour, he lost his ability to speak.

'I'm not good at deception,' she said.

His mindfulness returned. The distance between them increased. 'It's not deception. It's survival.'

She didn't respond, standing as firm as a statue and eyes as unfeeling.

He wanted to change the statue. To soften it. To bring it to life in a way it had never been before.

But it was not his role to take.

‘You must be among the people who will be helpful and you must persuade them you’re worthy,’ he said. ‘Life is like mirrors reflecting our outsides, not holding our insides up for everyone else to witness. People envision us through their own eyes and hardships.’

With a flutter of her lashes, she batted his statement from her. ‘Words from someone at the top of the heap.’

‘But it’s a heap. And it can be climbed. Surely you have a drop of adventurous spirit inside you. You’d better if you’re devising a plan of taking on a business endeavour.’

‘You’re proposing more than a drop.’

‘You must don your armour. Your livelihood might depend on it. And your parents need you to be strong.’

‘I don’t have the funds to compete with earls’ and bankers’ families. To appear at the gatherings over and over and mingle with them. And I am strong.’ Her voice faltered.

‘Strong enough to help your parents?’

She flinched.

He couldn’t summon a smile. It was as if he watched two people he did not know.

‘I don’t want to dance the night away,’ she said. ‘I want to be serious. To be myself. I want to learn from Mr Grimsley. Besides, I can’t receive the invitations to go among society’s notables.’

‘You should trust me on this. I can help with the invites.’

‘Perhaps.’ One clipped word with not quite two syllables.

With the frost lingering in the air, he bowed and took his leave.

But he left a part of himself behind in the room with Rachael. It was a part that he could not see, or feel, but he knew something was missing inside him that hadn’t been missing when he arrived.

They would likely never see each other again, except from a distance.

## *Chapter Ten*

‘Your mother told me Montfort is here.’ Her father hurried into the room. He examined the space and discovered she was alone. He checked again, making sure he’d not missed seeing Devlin hiding behind a curtain or in a corner.

‘Yes. He just left.’ She picked up the newspaper, noticing the stiff creases. The places Devlin’s hand had smeared the un-ironed ink. No matter, it would make excellent fodder for the fire.

‘What’s that?’ her father asked, diverted.

‘The Viscount wanted me to read the society pages,’ she said.

‘I heard.’ His chest puffed. ‘What did he think of it? Of the broken betrothal? The rumours?’

‘He was dismayed.’

‘Oh.’ Her father’s lips moved again, but no sound emerged.

‘Dismayed,’ he finally repeated. ‘Well, your happiness is more important than anything else.’ He moved into the hallway, shoulders slumped, seeming to forget they were having a conversation.

His footsteps plodded in the hallway. Rushed whispers. Her mother’s voice. Consoling her father.

She opened the paper again and the words hadn’t changed.

Yes, she had financial needs to keep her mind from this. For today.

She gathered her skirts in her hand and hurried out of the room and down the stairs.

Outside, she rushed to the street and saw the carriage, already trundling away.

She waved the paper wide and then flung it towards the carriage, scattering the pages into the air.

The wheels slowed.

She stood alone, watching each revolution as the cab springs squeaked while the driver slowed, then navigated a sharp turn.

Papers were strewn around her feet. She scooped them up and held them, waiting for the vehicle to return.

Devlin jumped from the carriage. ‘Oh, did I forget that?’ He smiled. ‘I really was giving that rubbish to you.’

She scrunched it into a smaller wad. ‘I’m making no promises.

But I'll try. If you'll help me.' Wind blew a lock of hair across her face and she brushed it aside.

He was silent, but this time he knew it was because happiness was trying to flourish in his heart. The part of himself that he'd left behind had returned and filled him stronger than ever.

Rachael needed him and that made him whole.

'The Countess will produce invitations for you,' he said.

'That would be kind.'

He took the crumpled mess from her hands. 'You've got a smudge of ink. By your ear.'

'I almost always get newsprint on my face. It's a skill I have.' She brushed it, missing.

He nodded to the vehicle. 'Let me put this aside and we'll talk about the skills you'll need to navigate the finest ducal ball.'

He tossed the print into the interior of the vehicle and closed the door. They stood, the body of the carriage shielding them from most eyes.

'The smudge is still there.' He questioned with his brows, she nodded and remained immobile, while he brushed the speck at her ear. Bolts of warmth caused her to feel like a different person.

He stilled. 'You're perfect now.'

'I don't have a lot of gowns to wear for gatherings and festivities among exalted peers. You have to spend a great sum on many dresses. Mrs Grimsley's daughter makes all my clothing, except for the clothing for balls. I don't know if she is skilled enough for them.'

'You must not concentrate on what you can't do at an event, or in life, because the world is full of those things. You must ponder on what you can do. You must work on the bridge to build that will get you in the direction you want to go. The shortest path and the easiest path are already overfilled by others.'

She put a hand at her throat. 'That's what you say to help me? Encouraging me?'

He nodded. 'You will do what feels impossible to you. Humans do the near unobtainable all the time. Every single day someone is out there making strides. Someone who ignores the struggle and focuses on the goal, who is willing to play the game with what he has and not what everyone else has.'

'I'm not skilled at the easy conversations people have in gatherings.'

'Again, you're looking for excuses. You don't need to walk into the room once and have everyone amazed that such a wondrous person has deemed to attend their night. At a soirée, you would

merely have to convince them of your honesty, your integrity and let them admire the jewellery.'

He tapped her wrist. 'If you've a bracelet that goes with the dress, you must wear it and be seen. You are not to be *just* a shopkeeper's daughter. You bring every bit of your genuineness into the room when you walk in. And you are to make everyone envious of the woman who can drape herself in jewels and have no unease about the cost. They won't notice the dress. They'll only notice the loveliness. Are you aware of the expense of jewels?'

'Yes, but I can wear a new bauble once and it goes back to Grimsley the next day. To me, even the most expensive ones wear just the same as the glass ones.'

She held up her empty wrist. 'Once I took a bracelet covered in sapphires from Father's cases and it was too big for me, but I wore it around the house for the day until he saw it. I feared he would collapse. He said I had more on my wrist than the roof over our heads.'

'I like your wrist without adornment, but this is not about you. It's business. You can transform yourself with the gentle artillery, the battle plan and reinforcements if needed.'

'You make it sound like a war.'

'That's marriage. This is tactics.'

'Marriage shouldn't be a war. I didn't expect mine to Mr Tenney to be such a thing.' Sadness choked her words.

'I assure you, only your gracious spirit could have made it a happy home. He would have been the ruler and expected you to stay safely under his thumb.'

'I wouldn't have believed you a fortnight ago. But I most likely would have done as he wished and never noticed it. I wanted to be a good wife. I wanted a happy household. I wanted...a marriage like my mother and father have.'

She wanted a marriage like her parents'? He suspected it was the same as hoping for the lightning strike the coachmen had mentioned.

Yet, he didn't have the temperament to tell her that. Nor did he wish to tell her that he'd almost stepped into a marriage similar to what she would have had with Tenney. He supposed that was why it had been so important to help her. Why it was still so vital to him to assist her.

He resumed his natural persuasiveness. 'It is a competitive field on the marriage mart. You must be careful not to make enemies there. A jealous woman will not buy your jewellery.'

'I shall be careful,' she said. 'I will not dance with any males I

believe are searching for a wife. Only the older and happily married would I accept and rarely those. I will have a sprained foot, a broken slipper.' She paused. 'Or a pained knee.' She touched over her behind and patted the air. 'This part of my knee still pains me, but I can sit now.'

'I'm sorry I did not get there sooner.'

'You saved my life. Don't apologise.'

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. 'The marriage would have been called off anyway, even if Tenney had not been so malevolent. I would never have been able to disrobe in front of him.'

'A man worth his salt wouldn't care about the marks.'

He didn't care if the scars were hideous except for the part of them that hurt her. 'Personally, I have never concerned myself about whether a woman might have a blemish on her...derrière. I don't know of a man who has.'

In fact, a man might enjoy spending a night caressing it when it healed. Might think it a treasured part of a woman he cared about.

'Well, my leg is raw as well. Mother says it will heal further, but it is difficult to believe.'

He held up his bent little finger. 'How much do you care about this?'

'Not at all. I'm sorry you were hurt, but it is nothing.'

'That is the same way I feel about your...wound.'

'Thank you for your kind words.'

'Honest ones.'

'Delivered with kindness.'

She reached to the lapel of his coat. 'I must thank you. You are a rake on the outside, but a knight on the inside.'

'I would say there is a lot of night, but not the kind you are thinking of. Do not place too much store in me. If Tenney loved you, he'd just be thankful you are alive.'

He was.

The knowledge lodged in him with such strength his breath caught.

This would not do. She was not a woman for a rake and he had learned his lesson.

He knew he could make his friends notice her, but he didn't want them to. She deserved a happier home than his acquaintances could provide for her. They weren't worthy of this gem.

But he hated her placing her future at the whims of people selecting wares for their home.

'Hunting one husband might be easier than roping in many of

them and their wives to buy trinkets for their houses,' he said.

She shook her head. 'No. I deluded myself with a betrothal. Thinking back, I didn't like the feeling anyway. The weakness of my mind that came from being around that person. I don't want to feel like that ever again.' She frowned. 'But I rather like living well. I know the love of money is an evil thing and I don't wish for a romance with it, but it will keep me comfortable.'

He put his hand over hers and held it close to his heart. He liked having her near, it reassured him she was safe, secure. 'A romance is not always a bad thing, should it not go too far,' he said.

With that, he took her head in his hand as their foreheads touched. Their breaths mingled, lighting a belief in him that love wasn't only possible, it was inevitable.

Her lips parted and she said the only thing that could have dampened his ardour.

'Have you been in love?'

'Yes. It didn't last.' Words short. Clipped.

He gave her the barest wink and the softest smile. 'I will see that you have invites soon. And tomorrow, I will get my friends to tell the truth of the disagreement between you and the mushroom.' Then he escorted her to her house's entrance and returned to his carriage, leaving.



## Chapter Eleven

The next morning, Rachael slipped out of the house with her maid who'd arranged for a hackney to take them to the newspaper office. Tenney had once told her how things could get accomplished. She'd disagreed with him at the time, but now she considered his solution.

Devlin was going to get his friends to help her spread the truth, but she'd lain awake long into the night thinking of how she could help herself.

Her mind had kept wandering to Devlin and how she'd felt, standing with him by the carriage. They'd been close in those moments. United. Then she'd asked about love and the fantasy of unity had evaporated, gone into the air as if it had never been.

Once at the building, Rachael went inside. 'Could I speak to the person who wrote this particular article?'

The maid held out the paper.

An unshaven man walked to the servant, lids drooping over his reddened eyes, and a wearied set to his mouth. He coughed, studying the words. 'I did. 'Cause I write every word in that paper. Even the ones I don't like.'

'It's about my life,' she said. She couldn't see compassion behind those tired eyelids. 'And it's speculations. Untrue ones.'

He grabbed the paper, lids dropping further, taking his time while he read, then tossed the print aside when he finished. 'Show me the proof that it's lies. You can't. I print observations and suggest they could be true, or not.'

'If you could be so kind as to print an announcement that it has been a mutual decision, and Tenney and I have agreed to go our separate ways, I would much appreciate it.' She did her impression of a most prim and proper miss. The person she really was.

'That does not sell papers. No one cares. Give me something that does sell papers. Even if I did print a piece written exactly as you wished, it's not going to matter to anyone now. People like to read the worst whether they believe it or not. And, of course, they do.'

'You would be doing the right thing.'

'I don't print prayer books.'

She had to keep her goal in mind.

‘It would mean so much to me.’ She motioned to the maid. The servant wedged herself around Rachael and held open a box so the man could see inside.

Guilt trickled into her, but she pushed it away. She wasn’t asking him to tell lies. But to be more honest.

‘If you would print something to ease this for me—and it truly was an error in print, a malicious tale—then I will send my maid by with this gift for the lady in your life. You win in two ways, by doing the right thing and having a trinket for your wife.’

She lowered her jaw. ‘Bread and butter tastes wonderful, but jewels last longer.’

Then she turned to leave.

Either it would work, or it wouldn’t, and no sense in belabouring it.

‘Don’t be in such a hurry to leave,’ the man called, stopping her. ‘Sometimes I like doing the right thing. Let me have a peep at that charm again.’

She stopped. ‘When I read the new story.’

‘What story?’ He chewed his lip.

She fanned her face with her glove. ‘My scars concerned me. I didn’t know how bad they’d be. And I didn’t want to inflict them on Mr Tenney.’

‘Scars?’ His demeanour brightened. ‘Scars, on a lovely person such as yourself, might sell papers.’ He examined her, face pinched. ‘But ain’t nobody going to be convinced you’ve a blemish.’

‘My leg.’ She closed her eyes hard, then opened them, gathering strength. ‘I was burned. Everyone knows. And truly now, it would be no lie to say I never wanted Ambrose to observe the injury. At the time, it all happened so fast I didn’t think of it. But...’ she shook her head ‘...now that I do reflect—no.’

‘That should sell papers. True love...’ He crossed his eyes for a half-beat on the word ‘love’, then his voice faded to a breathy drama. ‘Blighted by a noble sacrifice. A damsel saving her intended, as she martyrs herself for her sweetening.’

‘More or less.’ Then she strolled to her hackney, her heart pounding in her chest. The maid gave a low whistle of approval.

‘Don’t forget my trinket,’ he called out.

‘My maid will deliver it when I see the newsprint.’

Rachael waited inside the front door. Her maid had taken a sealed letter to Devlin’s house and delivered it directly to him.

Her house was dark except for the lamps Rachael used for light to read.

Three taps. Pause. Four taps. Pause. Then five taps.

She half held her breath when she opened the door. The lamplight reflected off his smile. He was little more than shadows, but she could fill in each facet as if he stood in sunlight.

Her heart thudded. He reminded her of an oasis, something to dream about in the wee hours of the night and every memory of him to be recalled before she slept. She added this sight to her images of him.

Internally, she shook herself. She could not be on that path. She'd not even fully escaped the last disastrous attachment.

'I can't believe you went to the newspaper office,' he said.

'I was being practical.' She raised her chin, even though she could hardly believe she had done it either. 'And I'm not always good with conversing in crowds, but I gathered my courage and found someone who might speak for me.'

'I told three of my friends the truth of the matter regarding the first story.' He clasped her hand. 'They were sworn to secrecy. Lord Bart was there, a fourth—I neglected to get a promise from him. It wasn't an accident. He's most likely to tell tales.'

His eyes dropped to her hand in his, as if he'd only just realised he was holding it, but he continued speaking. 'I told them I didn't know the true details of the scars, but I did remind them that I had summoned the physician. And that I had been involved when the accident occurred. My mother feels partially responsible and hopes to launch you in society. And that is true. She does.'

He lifted their clasped hands, and briefly brushed his knuckles against her cheek. A shaft of feelings moved through her body to her feet, immobilising her.

Heartbeats passed before she could speak again. 'That is kind of her to do so.'

'It is nothing but the truth. Mother has a weakness for broken betrothals. My parents were having a spirited conversation one evening and it appeared that my father had been attached to another woman and neglected to tell Mother that he had a second sweetheart when he asked Mother to wed. Old news, but still fresh enough in Mother's mind to bring out the protective spirit. She suggested that you get invited to more events in town. She thinks it was her idea and I never argue with her. Between her and my father, we are acquainted with most of London. Do not be surprised if she calls on you tomorrow.'

'Your mother is a dear woman and you inherited her caring.'

He examined her, his devil-may-care appeal rising to the surface. 'You might be a natural at this charm if you practise it a little more. It works on me. And with that said, if I might offer a suggestion...'

He squeezed her hand.

‘As you have offered several in the past, no harm in one more.’

‘Walk head high. Act as if you were born in every room you are in. Carry yourself as a princess. Pick a woman who you admire and pretend you are her,’ he said. ‘No one can observe inside you to your doubts. No one can peer beyond the façade you present. When you forget and make a faux pas...’ He shrugged. ‘Do as she would do. Let it flutter into nothingness. Don’t dwell on it. It never happened. Just imagine how someone you admire would act.’

‘The Duchess of Pendleton. She is perfection itself.’

‘The Duchess?’ He seemed startled by her remark.

‘Yes. My mother and I have seen her when she is out and about. She carries herself so well.’

She touched her hair. ‘I understand what you mean, but that is not so simple. I’m not confident travelling in such esteemed circles. They’ve all been friends since the cradle and I barely know them. I’m lost when they all talk about an event that I know nothing of and I feel adrift. It has to be obvious.’

‘My mother’s maid can create the illusion of sophistication for you.’

Her eyes widened.

‘Yes,’ he whispered. ‘The maid knows a few tricks with smudging things. I’ve seen it.’

‘Smudging?’

‘Yes. Around the eyes. Mother will be moping around like she has lost her best friend, then she’ll get ready for an event and you would never guess how morose she had been only hours earlier.’

‘You aren’t serious?’

‘It’s not that you need any artifice to be beautiful. But you wish to glide into society with the most prominent people in town and you want to stand out, not only as if you were invited, but as if it is a birthright that won’t be denied.’

‘That is a frightening idea. That my future is determined by my confidence. My outward appearance.’ She steeled herself.

‘With people talking about the broken betrothal and it so soon after the injury, interest could be concentrated on you. This is a perfect time for you to shine.’

She touched her throat.

‘Carry yourself proudly.’ He took her shoulders.

‘I do not want to pretend to be anyone. Mr Tenney’s speech always speeded up when he spoke of the Duchess of Pendleton, although it took him twice as long to say her name as it should have.’ It would have been a lie to say he drooled. At least a visible

drool and he'd only seen her from a distance.

'She has the art of being the Duchess perfected to a science,' Devlin said. 'Perfect the skill of being a new Rachael Albright.'

Being a new Rachael didn't sound so bad. She wasn't happy with the old one.

'Have confidence in yourself.'

Everyone could tell she lacked self-assurance? Oh, that didn't make her feel better.

'Remember, you have two parts. An inside and an outside. Men tend to forget anything but the outside of a person,' he said. 'I suspect you tend to only think of the inside. This is not the time to even consider that part of you. Don't wear your doubts openly. No one can see past the façade.'

She touched a hand over her stomach. A façade? She wasn't a puppet.

He took her fingers and removed them from her midsection. 'Don't be so dismayed.'

'How can I not?' Nothing seemed right with her.

'You will do fine.'

She let out a breath. 'At my last event, my betrothal ended and at the one before that, I could have lost my life.'

'When you put it like that...' He gently put his hands on her wrists and pulled her closer. 'Please do not be offended if I keep my distance from you.'

She freed her hands and jabbed a teasing nudge at his chest. 'Perhaps that would be best for both of us.'

As he stumbled into the wall, he caught her waist and took her with him. Then their eyes caught, stilling her with intensity. 'In truth, there is nothing wrong with the real Rachael.' The whisper of his voice caressed her. 'Everything about her feels right, sounds right and is right.'

He kept her close and she never ever wanted to separate from the clasp. Her skirts pressed against him and the power in his legs kept her upright, and his arms merely framed her, holding her in place, suspending her by the awareness in his gaze.

'But that is my impression.' His words caressed her skin. 'You must feel the same way and you don't. If you pretend you are someone else, you will believe in the things you do and not criticise yourself that your choices aren't right. They'll be her choices and you'll feel they're correct.'

'Are you this confident, or is it a ruse you play as well?'

His assuredness shone through. 'I'm happy with the dance of life, the game, the partners and all the rest, and I want you to be the

same. I want you to have the self-assurance that will sweep you into a room and you'll be at home there...in whatever room you enter.'

She wanted to tell him she wasn't that person, but in his arms she felt a strength she didn't know existed in her.

She rested against him, feeling the energy of life combining them. Their bodies aligned and she'd never felt closer to anyone.

His mind tensed because his body was beginning to separate from his brain and only have an awareness of the femininity against him.

He should step away. Instead he savoured the soft scent of her and the pleasures she created. The way his blood surged more swiftly through his limbs and how nowhere else would be better than being where he was.

He let the wisps of her hair feather his face, but then he retreated, confronted with the innocence of her eyes, velvety, and with lashes that could sweep his feet from under him and swirl them into a bedroom.

He beheld her innocence and suspected how much grief Tenney had caused her, and he could not further something that would be unfair to her.

Anger at Tenney, frustration with her innocence and his demand within himself to do the right thing for her flickered to life inside him. He distanced himself even more. 'You'll find something that works for you and it will get easier.'

Then he took the key from the wall and put it in her hand. 'Lock up behind me and expect an invitation, courtesy of my mother's machinations, to arrive tomorrow.' He leaned closer, whispering, 'It was lost in the post and found just this afternoon. And there will be more. The social Season will be starting in earnest as people return from the countryside. So have your dancing slippers at the ready and be sure to thank my mother for her wondrous idea to bring you into the pomp of the social world.'

'I suspect it is the son's machinations that I am to thank.'

He opened the door, lingering longer. 'Do not forget, you are the scarred phoenix, rising from a broken betrothal, to some day become a woman who has her life in her own hands and will comprehend what it is like to control a successful endeavour as well.'

'It will be easier with you there.'

'I wouldn't normally attend and I don't want to draw more attention to the suggestion that I am the cause of your broken betrothal. I'd already agreed to be at my uncle's house that day and I'll be too late arriving home.'

He saw the hesitation in her eyes. He paused, still clasping the

wood.

He wanted her to know he wasn't deserting her. That it was truly best for her not to appear attached so soon after Tenney. 'You will have everyone at your feet.'

In the night, standing in front of the light, she appeared a waif, lost, with luminous eyes and lovely lips. And he fell at her feet.

He clasped her waist again and the warmth of her skin melded into his. The planning dissolved—all he saw was Rachael and he could feel her breaths.

The kiss was brief, but he felt it searing through him, changing too much, too quickly. He stepped away, quickly, ending the intensity. Ending their connection.

He pulled his assurance back into himself. 'You'll be the most important person there.'

With that, he brushed a hand over her shoulder, a reassuring pat, and he left.

He'd not realised how dark the night was and how cold it had turned.

## *Chapter Twelve*

Two evenings later, Rachael tested her balance on her shoes. She hoped she didn't topple from her heels.

She leaned towards the mirror and studied the face that peered at her. This was definitely her best. Better than her best. But was it enough?

Her hair had never taken so long to be arranged, but it was swept up so naturally that she would have guessed it had tumbled into place on its own if she'd not been the one waiting for it to be finished. Some of the curls had been purchased, but they blended so well with her own locks that no one would detect the difference.

It had taken most of the day to become the person in the mirror. The stranger. A confident woman. Not just the woman with the burned derrière and the one who'd spent much of her life waiting for a marriage that would never happen.

She feared she hadn't chosen the correct jewels. She'd picked them because she felt hidden behind them and now she doubted she'd made the right decision. The necklace felt foreign against her skin and dangled against the bodice of her dress. The sapphires were lovely, but they overpowered her.

She straightened. The dress was a plain blue silk, one that was a favourite, but she wasn't sure it was elegant enough.

Her burns suddenly ached because she'd been so tense and even her body didn't feel like hers.

A different person stared at her from the mirror. One who blinked when she did and shifted when she did.

She brushed her cheek, then felt a tremble in her fingers.

She tried to get her hand to be still, thankful she would be wearing gloves if someone asked her to dance. Hopefully no one would scrutinise her closely and see the shaking.

But if they did...

And who would partner her?

She didn't know the people holding the event and she likely didn't know any of the men her age. No one would request a dance. She gulped in air.

In the past, she'd only danced a few dances with anyone other than Tenney and it hadn't bothered her in the least to be a wallflower. She'd used Tenney as an invisible partner. A beau who



couldn't be there. Not dancing had appeared a natural choice, but now she wondered if she'd hidden behind him.

Devlin expected the impossible. He just didn't see it because he'd been born with so much at his fingertips. People separated, giving him room to join their ranks when he arrived in a room, and it had been so natural no one around him noticed. He had no idea that she only frequented the edges of that same group.

She wouldn't be able to increase her father's business. She would be a hindrance to it. No one would respect her and everyone would speak of her broken betrothal. She wouldn't be a scarred phoenix. She'd be a burned goose.

Rachael studied the face gazing at her from the mirror.

She leaned down, putting both hands on the dressing table, stilling them by pressing against the wood. Then she picked up her gloves, pulled one on, pressed the fabric in place at her fingers, and repeated the process with her other one.

She couldn't do it. She would ruin what remained of the goodwill her family had. Her lack of social graces could cause people to dismiss the shop because they belonged to that *awkward woman's* family.

Searching out her mother, she found her leaving her room.

'Goodness, you're beautiful,' her mother gasped. 'I almost didn't recognise you.'

Rachael felt her last vestiges of faith in herself plummet.

'Your father is making sure the carriage is ready for us,' her mother said. 'I can't believe we have been invited to this event. Those days we spent with the Countess...' She let out a breath. 'I never imaged our lives could change so in such a short time.'

Rachael nodded. 'We have a slipper in the door of the best society, Mother.'

'It is a tenuous grasp at best.'

'True.' She touched her mother's arm, capturing her attention. Her mother would be a better ambassador than she would.

'I don't feel well, Mother. Please let it be known that I couldn't attend due to a megrim. My head feels like it could start pounding and I'm sure the drive there will make it worse, plus the music will not do me any favours.'

'Rachael—' Her mother gasped. 'This is a chance for you to meet other men now that your betrothal is over.'

'But I can't go. Something is wrong.' She held out her hand and showed her mother the trembling. 'I can't risk being out and about when I feel so unsettled.'

'Then none of us will go. If you're really ill, I don't want you left

alone.'

'Nonsense. Of course you can attend. You must. This is a chance for you and Father to be among society. Please, pass along my sincerest regrets to everyone.'

'I'm not sure...' Her mother studied Rachael.

'You accepted the invitation and you cannot, cannot, let the Countess down because she wanted you to be there. Please.'

It wasn't the Countess Rachael feared letting down. It was her family. And Devlin. She could never be the person he wished her to be. It would be better to let him find out now than for her to begin a charade that would only end in defeat.

She hoped he could understand.

His plan for her to belong in society was overreaching. She was a shopkeeper's daughter and could not find common ground with a duke's daughter, or a woman who had had tea with the Regent's mother.

Devlin had been born in that world and he didn't understand the invisible barriers. Money sometimes erased the walls, but she didn't have that any more. This wasn't a game. It was a losing battle and she was no Wellington.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

Devlin stopped by his mother's sitting room after his late breakfast. She sat by the window, her reading glasses low on her nose, and her teacup in one hand and a pencil in the other.

Devlin greeted her and walked around to peer over her shoulder at a list of instructions for the housekeeper.

'She wasn't there last night.' His mother put down the cup. 'Oh, my, the tea is cold. Terrible error of me to let it sit so long. But, no, Miss Albright was not in attendance.'

He'd not considered himself so transparent.

He held himself perfectly still. Well, that was the way of things. Rachael was her own person. If she did not want his interference, so be it.

He gave the tiniest nod of acknowledgement to his mother's words. But inside, he felt as if she'd been a sweetheart and he'd been at the event, and she'd chosen to stay home rather than to see him.

'Mrs Albright confided that she suspected the dissolution of her daughter's acquaintance with Mr Tenney had put her out of sorts for dancing.'

'Should have made her want to dance.'

'I suppose.' His mother turned, staring at him from over her spectacles. She took another sip of her tea. 'Just don't cause more grief for her.'

Grief? The only one he would like to cause problems for was the man she'd fancied.

She rested her cup in its saucer, a light whisper of china against china sounding in the silent room. 'It's not that I dislike her or would be upset if you were to court her. I just don't see you pursuing such a gentle sort. She's not used to the world around us. And people can be cruel. You can only promote someone so much and then it is up to them. Besides, you should know... I've heard rumours that the businesses owned by her father are not—are looking a little drab.'

'She needs this.'

'If she doesn't want to flounce about in society, you should accept that. Not everyone is happy spending an hour dressing, an hour getting her hair fixed, a carriage ride when trussed so tightly you

can't breathe, then dancing with men you can hardly tolerate when they're sober, much less when wobbly from a strong punch. Punch, the drink. Not the action.' She made a fist with the pencil enclosed in it and jabbed the air.

'You make it sound like an ordeal to be in society.'

'No.' She rotated to write another word on her list. 'I enjoy it, but not everyone does. And I don't know that she would. Don't try to make her into a female version of yourself. We all return to our true characters.'

'She must become more visible.'

She didn't raise her head from her writing. 'If she embarrasses herself, it won't further her. And the poor girl doesn't seem to have a knack for being at ease.'

'She can learn.'

'Yes.' His mother let out a sigh. 'And I can learn to cook. Don't hold your breath. You'd be much better off eating one of my stunning flower arrangements than any macarons I might make.'

'Your florals do look good enough to eat,' he said, his mind still on Rachael as he bent to kiss his mother's cheek.

'I agree.' She gave his shoulder an absent-minded pat, her attention returning to the paper. 'I'll manage it so that she gets a few more invitations, but she's going to have to put her heart into it and her mother will have to respond with at least a few invites to tea soon, or it's all going to be a waste of time.'

He stepped to the door.

'I expected you to be gone today,' she said. 'How did your trip with your father and his brother go?'

'Uncle Ted's in better health. He sends his love. Or at least half of it. He said he doesn't want to steal you from Father.'

'Did he say that in front of your father?'

'Of course. Father didn't think it clever.'

'You're more like Ted than your father. You favour the Earl in appearance, but you inherited a brain from somewhere and I can't think it was from your father. It had to be his brother.'

'Could it have been from you?' He stopped at the threshold. 'You told me that the Hinshaw estates were for sale for a pittance because the Duke needed funds to invest in his shipyard immediately.'

She returned to her list, lifted her cup again and pushed her glasses higher on her nose. 'Had to wait a while to sell it, but we made a tidy profit, didn't we? Ruffled your father's feathers.' Her chuckle was low. 'Loved it.'

Devlin remembered those days. He was surprised he'd not walked

around with his hair standing straight out in fear. He'd taken a risk by using the strength of his future inheritance to secure the loan.

It had been frightening to invest everything his mother truly had that was her own, but she'd insisted, and then he'd had to locate the rest of the purchase price.

'Until then, your father deemed you a youth and couldn't get past those days when he was never questioned, just followed.' She flicked a fingernail over the paper. 'By both of us.'

His father had been angry and hadn't recovered quickly. Yet as he got over the irritation, he'd treated them both more respectfully. Devlin's parents' relationship even improved.

'We made a considerable profit.' He'd not cared particularly about the profit, but just that he'd not indebted himself for the future.

Movement in the room ceased except for his mother's face. 'It was a strike for independence, not just for yours, but for mine as well. Your father took it better than I judged he would.'

'We didn't make anything on the next one.'

'We broke even. A good learning experience for us. So, it was a success. And now your father trusts you and you've worked tremendously in that devil-may-care *I'm-just-enjoying-myself-and-what-property-are-you-hoping-to-sell?* way you have about you.' She focused her attention on her list again and mumbled, 'I created a monster.'

Devlin's stare jerked to her.

'Not you, my son. Myself.' Her eyes sparkled in laughter and she waved him out of the room.

Striding into the hallway, he accepted that his father had needed him, although none of them had seen it at the time. His father had trusted people too easily. His mother didn't.

Rachael's family business could increase. She'd have to take risks, but it was a bigger danger never to take them. He didn't want her to have to depend on a marriage to increase her status. He'd seen the pride in his mother's face when they'd sold the Hinshaw estates and made a profit and he'd had to talk her out of some of the bigger gambles she'd planned afterwards. She'd heeded each word he'd said and addressed them as if they'd been generated from her own perceptions.

His mother and father made a formidable pair.

Leaving the room, he pushed the images of a joined family aside, planning to find some friends with nothing more important than to plan a card game or have a spot of revelry.

He went outside and moved quickly to get beneath the canopied

trees, his energy increased by the cooler day. At the nearby mews, he greeted the stable master, took the saddle before the man could reach it and saddled his horse, then he led it by the ribbons into the street and jumped astride.

In moments, he was riding along the street, which emitted a peaceful family presence. Houses surrounded him on both sides, silent reminders of caring groups. He could imagine a loving family behind each door. His imagination dismissed the possibility that unhappiness resided in any home. For the day, he was surrounded by caring families secure in their world.

He'd hated to be in his house when he was a child and both parents were in residence and were arguing. He loved them both apart, but couldn't stand either of them when they were together and were picking at each other.

He wondered if that was how he'd learned his ease around people, by trying to cajole his parents' anger or hurt into contentment. Or from watching his mother switch from being furious at his father to welcoming her guests with everything swept from view as if she'd had the most glorious day ever.

That was how he'd always presumed marriages to be. Two people joined together who could put on a happy face when they were around others, but who jostled for control in private.

Some of the fury he'd dissipated over the years must have hidden inside him. Now he felt a slow simmer of irritation at Rachael which surprised him. He was never angry. He didn't like anything which took from his *joie de vivre*. He didn't have a right to be upset with her. True, he'd offered advice and arranged to get her an invite, and she'd not attended.

A favour had been ignored. That was reason for irritation, he supposed.

The clubs would be a much better way to spend the remainder of the day than thinking about Rachael's future and the way she'd just tossed his advice to the wind. But his horse didn't want to go to the clubs.

It kept turning in the direction of Rachael's house.

And who was he to argue with a beast?

Three taps. Pause. Four taps. Pause. Then five taps.

Finally, a butler answered the door.

'Tell Miss Albright the Viscount is here for her.'

The man hesitated and Devlin stepped inside. 'Now, please.' Devlin ended the request with a small bow that took the butler by surprise. 'Thank you,' Devlin added, as if Rachael were already on her way.

‘Of course,’ the servant answered and left to do as Devlin asked.

He’d just entered a man’s house and convinced a servant to do his bidding, and he wasn’t certain the butler even questioned it after the first momentary falter of surprise. A butler was trained to do as requested. A viscount was trained to request.

In a few minutes, the man returned, and led Devlin to a sitting room.

Rachael stood behind the sofa, waiting, almost mouse-like, as if she might skitter to some dark place of solitude. She watched her hand trace the pattern on the upholstery. Except for the intense scrutiny she gave to a fabric she must have seen thousands of times, he would have assumed by her expression that she didn’t know he was in the room.

Relief overtook him, but his annoyance didn’t evaporate. It seemed almost fuelled by the sight of her and the unfamiliar irritation warred with the relaxed poise imbedded in him. He felt jostled by his own body.

He absorbed the pale blue of her dress, the tousled hair piled on her head, the slender arm outstretched, and another, stronger surge of exasperation flooded into him. How could that daft Tenney not note how far above him she was and not get down on his knees and beg her to forgive him for even thinking himself worthy of her.

‘How did you like the soirée?’ he asked, his voice sounding like someone else’s. Someone he didn’t recognise. Or, perhaps he did. His father.

‘You know well that I didn’t go.’

‘Yes.’ He stepped to the front of the sofa, at war with himself over the need to be closer to her and yet keep a barrier between them.

‘My mother once hired a companion for herself and part of the woman’s job was to teach Father proper speech. I kept remembering it and fearing I’d say the words as he sometimes does.’

‘To every newly born babe the world is a trial. Not every new adventure is easy.’

‘It’s easier for you. For them.’ Her perfect chin jutted and her eyes sparked anger, and he absorbed it like a plant moving to the sunshine.

‘For the others at the dance it is something they have been a part of since they were children.’ The ire in her face softened and her words matched. ‘They know each other and they visit with friends there. I am a newcomer to that part of society.’

Instantly, her softness pulled him closer and he couldn’t keep the sofa between them, but walked around. She reached out for him, clasping his hand.

His mind crashed in all different directions at once, remembering how he'd rushed to save her, unaware of his steps or his life or surroundings, only moving for her safety. He'd had no choice to make, or even a decision. It had just happened.

And now she held him immobile and nowhere else would he have wanted to be.

'Society fits me like a well-made glove,' he said. 'But there is no secret handshake. No hidden password to get you into that world. You have to get there on your wits. You fight with a smile, an open heart and a strong backbone. You're not doing this for today. You're doing it for ten years from now.'

'It's much harder for me.'

'Doesn't matter. Every time you take a first step there is always someone who it was easier for. Someone it was harder for. Always.' Then he lowered his voice. 'Do you want to marry someone like Tenney? Or do you want to regard him with pride years from now and say to him without even speaking when you pass by him, *I could have been yours*, then give a little twist and walk on?'

Again, she calculated his expression. 'I didn't think you so vindictive.' Her hand slipped from his. She grasped his arm, lowered her voice and shifted so close he could scent vanilla surrounding her.

He'd not expected a wholesome fragrance to affect him so.

'I was too scared. I could not do it. I was shaking. I could not stop trembling. I could not force myself.'

'Tell yourself, starting now, that it is nothing but a little group of strangers who do not eat babies for breakfast. They are people. Like yourself. Humans. Humans you aren't at war with. The snipers only have words and they can be dulled with time and effort.'

'I cannot do it.'

'If you say that, then it's true.' He secured her shoulders, but in reality, she held him captive.

'Think of it, Rachael. Women marry. They give birth. All more risk than a simple dance.'

She turned her head. 'That doesn't make it less real. I don't know why I was so scared. It makes little sense. But I was. Real fear. After my parents left the house, I started shivering.'

'Then we will fight through it. The events aren't frightening. In fact, they get boring as the night lingers.'

She touched his arm. 'If I try again, will you be there with me?'

It was as if she imbued him with power, just from the light pressure on his sleeve.

'Of course.' He could have battled armoured dragons on the



strength she gave him.

She melted into his arms and he couldn't risk hurting her, either by retreating or by pursuing. He brushed a hand up her back, feeling the layers of clothing and slight ridges of her backbone making a trail for him to trace. She was so frail compared to him. No wonder she'd been concerned. Softer than velvet, more lush than any green forest.

Immediately his mind travelled to a mossy bank and her lying beside him, observing the heavens, alone in the world of nature, primitive and free.

He shook the images clear. He couldn't let his imagination go there. All the purity of their encounter faded, replaced by his body's burning need. He stepped aside.

Confusion fluttered across her face, but he immediately erased it by taking a wisp of her hair between two fingers and tucking it behind her ear. But he couldn't free himself of the image of the two of them lying beside each other.

'I don't fit there,' she said, the pain in her voice corralling his thoughts. 'I know it. They know it. I'm an outsider.'

'Yes. You are.' But she wasn't to him. When he'd first taken her in his arms and carried her to the sofa, he'd somehow become her defender. A man who'd let himself be slain rather than let her be hurt.

'It will likely take years for you to become entrenched,' he added, forcing his mind to consider the facts in front of him. 'Years. But you still can wear those jewels and show everyone the wares your father sells. It doesn't matter if you aren't acknowledged at first. You'll be accepted in time.'

He spoke the truth because he intended to become her shield against the world. He just couldn't become more involved in her life. He couldn't let the weakness she inspired in him rule him. He couldn't remember the softness of her skin or the fragile woman who needed him. Or be aware that her life would change for ever and the fear inside him that if he wasn't in her life, she would face the world alone.

He paused.

The women in his past, none had needed him.

Perhaps they'd needed a dance partner, or someone to ease their loneliness or someone who'd merely listen to their heartbreak.

But none had needed him.

He didn't want to ruin something dear.

He'd heard men who'd been foxed tell the stories of the one true love of their lives and how they'd spoiled everything by treating her

like every other woman they'd ever met.

He wanted Rachael to be the love of his life.

The one whose name remained just under the surface while he jested and made light of the world. The reason he was born.

'I want us to be friends,' he said, hoping he could live up to the word. Hoping he could find it within himself not to mar her trust in him, not to destroy the innocent faith in her eyes. 'For a long time.'

'We are,' she said. 'Friends.'

He wondered if the path to his own ache had already begun and he glimpsed into the wide eyes and knew that it had, and he didn't care.

He would suffer later, in the long hours of the night when he couldn't chase her from his memory. He would yearn for her and he would only have her in his dreams, and he would dread sleeping because when he awoke, he would know they were friends. And one put friends first.

'I'll be there for you,' he added, giving her a carefree smile. 'My mother will be having an event to welcome a few of her friends returning to London. You will be assured of an invitation, and, alas...' he gave her a rakish wink '...I am a dutiful son who must attend his mother's most important events.'

With that, he allowed himself the softest kiss, suitable for a sleeping babe, and slipped out of the door.

Standing against the wood he'd just pulled closed behind him, he gathered his resources, yet he lingered, reluctant to put more distance between them.

He must never touch her again.

It stirred memories of his past innocence. Something he'd left behind after he'd met a woman who said she loved him beyond all else. A woman he still spoke with on friendly terms, but one who meant absolutely nothing to him.

Rachael. He breathed the sound of her name.

## Chapter Fourteen

Rachael lifted the perfume, putting a drop on her wrists and letting the aroma of springtime waft in the air. Devlin remained in her mind, much like the fragrance, settling softly. Not something she was really aware of, yet, still, in a quiet moment, recollections of him were easily summoned.

She'd chosen the fragrance that morning because it reminded her of the scent after the shears had been used to cut the grass at the edge of the gardens and always gave her the feeling of new beginnings. Much like Devlin did.

You did not often get chances to start afresh. She hadn't planned to get the opportunity, nor had she wanted it at first, but she hoped to make the best of it. She'd taken her favourite dancing dress with her when she'd been to select the jewellery. It had taken her two hours of trying different pieces and listening to her mother's comments and even seeking her father's opinion.

At the door, she returned to the mirror, clenched her teeth, raised both fists in a pugilistic pose and then went down to collect her mother.

Her hands were shaking when she sat in the coach and her mother must have noticed. 'Dear, you're lovelier than ever. I've never been prouder of you. You've left that man behind and you're moving on to a new world. I know you'd rather hide in your room, but you aren't.'

Her father turned to her mother. 'What'd you say that for? Rachael's fine.'

'Yes, she is,' her mother agreed and spoke about the houses they were passing, rattling on as if they were all that could concern any of them.

For the first time, Rachael recognised the bravado in her mother's voice. The little quiver at the end of some of the sentences.

Rachael gathered her resources.

Her family needed her to be strong. This wasn't only about *her* courage.

Devlin stood near the piano, talking with guests when she arrived. He was in command of the group around him. She could tell by the upturned faces and the attention he garnered. He wasn't standing in the centre, but off to the side, yet he drew the people closer. Payton

and the others burst into laughter. Devlin gave a nod, acknowledging the humour in what he said, but on the upswing of his chin, his eyes caught hers and, at that second, everything else faded when his chin dipped and his eyes showed an awareness of her.

Then his attention returned to the crowd around him.

Devlin's eyes crinkled at the sides and he raised a glass, tilting it to his cousin. She heard Devlin say he was thankful the arrow that Payton shot through a closed window hit no one, but all the glass shards had been a devil to find.

Rachael knew that the story was about Payton, but every woman in the room heard and saw Devlin.

He had a way with a grin that somehow said he knew more than he told. His smile invited everyone to the soiree of life.

Rachael bit the inside of her lip.

She turned, but then she paused and glimpsed at Devlin. What harm did it do to gaze at art, as long as it was left alone and not touched? He was exactly how she would have designed a sculpture if she could have.

He made his way around the room, greeting most of the people and seeming to talk with everyone.

But the moment he stopped beside her and her mother, Rachael's heart warmed. This was no casual greeting, but more of a gentle commander's presence to bolster his troops.

Devlin and her mother chatted. Rachael observed the older woman relaxing into Devlin's words.

He only gave the briefest of glances to Rachael, but in that second their eyes met, a smile flashed from within him and the pleasant jolt of it lodged in her midsection. He didn't even need to speak specifically to her, but he'd reassured her.

Then he mentioned how glad he was that they both were enjoying themselves and excused himself to greet a friend. The temporary halt in his progress before he stepped away, little more than a flicker of extra recognition, fluttered over Rachael and nestled inside her, a warming hug with nothing more than eyes meeting.

Even after he left, the confidence he gave her remained. She wanted to challenge herself and stand alone in the room.

She turned to her mother and excused herself to visit the refreshment table. A tiny woman with white hair, and a feather almost as long as her cane, stood waving an oversized fan.

She'd heard of the Duchess of Highwood. A truly evil woman, if the comments were to be believed. Rachael shored up her confidence, ignoring the rising sound of conversation in the room,

covered only by scattered bouts of laughter.

She challenged herself to speak to the woman.

‘Isn’t the pineapple lovely?’ Rachael indicated the centre of the table.

‘What?’ The lady’s brow furrowed and she stared at Rachael’s lips.

‘Pineapple. Isn’t it grand?’

Wrinkles formed deeper around the lady’s lips and she spoke loudly enough that the people at the end of the room could hear.

‘I’ve not tried the apple wine. Would you fetch me a glass?’

Rachael nodded, unsure of what to do next. But then she saw a footman with a decanter of undetermined flavour and motioned to him. In seconds, he’d poured the Duchess a glass.

The woman sipped, then took another and another. ‘I can’t taste the apple,’ the woman near shouted. ‘But I like it.’

Rachael walked to the nearest wallflowers. They greeted her as if poison had just dripped into their midst.

Her mouth became dry. She stood with them for a cold moment, but left before her teeth started chattering. She retrieved a refreshment, thankful for something to hold.

She perused the room. Devlin was in the midst of another group where everyone was at ease.

Every cluster appeared so caught up in their own conversation that she didn’t dare progress closer to them and appear nothing more than a hanger-on.

Her mother was at the edge of another group of women. She returned to her mother’s side, thankful she had a place to find some respite from attempts to be accepted.

Happiness wreathed her mother’s face and she seemed completely oblivious to the fact that few more than the Countess spoke with them.

They were going to starve.

Where was a burning candle when you needed it? That event had been a rousing success compared to this evening.

Again, she felt the ache from the burn. And a softer twinge of loss, one from Devlin not being nearer.

Her mother left after saying she wanted to speak with Rachael’s father, then Rachael saw the Duchess of Highwood moving her way.

Rachael refused to retreat to the ladies’ retiring room.

‘Are you not the young woman who was scarred so terribly?’ The Duchess raised a brow. ‘With the flames reaching the ceiling and everyone screaming? They’ve done a wonderful job of repainting the walls. And so quickly.’

‘I don’t remember it that way,’ Rachael said. ‘But everything happened so fast I was only aware of what was right in front of me.’

‘Terrible that you had such a calamity so near the wedding and that you wouldn’t be able to consummate the vows, but then one must think to the future. How bad are the scars?’ The woman spoke loud enough that the group beside her had stopped chatting and listened.

The Duchess examined Rachael’s skin. ‘You can hardly detect the ones on your face.’

‘Yes. It’s fortuitous.’ She pursed her lips. *Her ability to consummate the marriage had come into question.* She’d not meant the tales to go that far.

‘Your Grace.’ Devlin appeared at Rachael’s side. ‘I would so relish a dance with you. Is this one taken?’

‘It is now,’ the Duchess said, stepping forward to drape an arm around Devlin and to pull herself so close that her breast squashed into him. Hopefully she would not be bruised the next day, but it wouldn’t be for lack of trying.

He smiled down at her. ‘I’m honoured.’

‘As you should be,’ the Duchess answered, a robust cackle at the end of her words.

Devlin led the Duchess to the floor so they would be in place when the dance commenced.

‘They don’t make them like that any more,’ one of the other ladies murmured. They all chuckled. Rachael didn’t know for sure if they spoke of the Duchess or Devlin and she was fairly certain it was true on both counts.

The ground didn’t open up and swallow her, and she seemed to have become invisible, so she retreated to a corner and sipped her second glass of wine, occasionally holding it with both hands when she noticed them shaking.

Even her stomach trembled, but when she watched Devlin’s ease, and ability to speak to the Duchess, she calmed.

That was how it was done, she realised. This war wasn’t to be fought with a sword, but with a smile. A smile for everyone.

Today, she only had to focus on baby steps, or, in the case of the wine in her hand, baby sips.

Then the Duchess’s words bounced in her mind.

Except, blast it, the whole world now presumed she couldn’t consummate a marriage.

While the others continued the celebration, she took a third glass of wine, but didn’t even sip it, content to warm the glass with her hands while trying to remain inconspicuous beside the curtains.

She recalled the Duchess's comments. Her reputation would be fairly locked in place if everyone assumed her unable to make love.

But Devlin would know otherwise and that would put her most chaste plans to the test. He could easily make her forget all the cautions she'd lived her life following.

Devlin appeared briefly at her mother's side and Rachael watched the charm in his eyes, and the persuasion on his face. She didn't have to hear the words. He seemed to be whispering softly, then her mother glanced at Rachael and frowned.

Devlin focused only on her mother, and she saw the encouraging nod. He stepped to the side and blocked the line of view between them.

Rachael knew she was being discussed, intensely.

The conversation lingered a bit longer and then Devlin left. Her mother glanced at Rachael as if she'd never seen her before and wasn't really seeing her then, but watching a future unfold. A bleak future.

He stopped at the Albrights' door. Three taps. Pause. Four taps. Pause. Then five taps.

He heard the key turn in the lock. The door opened.

Stepping inside, he longed to reach out and hold her, imagining their bodies swaying together in a simple, sensual dance in the faded light, but he'd promised her mother that he'd only be there for a few quick, respectable moments. He'd given the assurance freely at the time and would do so again for the chance to see Rachael, but he wished it hadn't been required.

Rachael hadn't changed her clothing, but her hair escaped from her knot, as if she'd loosened it after she arrived home. He didn't think she wore shoes either because she'd lost the height she'd had earlier. She'd turned herself into a little bird ready to close her eyes and nestle into a fluff of feathers. The perfect woman to come home to. *Come home to?* he mused. *Stay home with.*

He was starting to think like...

Like someone he didn't know. But someone he might like to become if it were possible.

He stepped into the tiny space as she shut the door, their fingers brushing, reminding himself that he must take care. 'I cannot stay long. I am taking too much risk with your reputation as it is just by visiting you.'

'I've already had a little notoriety. I don't like people noticing me.'

'Try to accept it. Some people love it.'

'The other guests tonight suspected I was there because your

mother feels responsible for the accident. I'm thankful for that assumption because it's a positive one.'

'She does want to help you.' He couldn't help himself. He reached out, clasping her arm, giving her reassurance that all was well. 'But you survived tonight admirably.'

'Well enough. I stopped shaking and feeling so nervous, but I don't think trying to be society's darling is an easy task. I couldn't eat all day and was starved when I got home.' She waved an arm to the platter on the small table. Crumbs of bread remained.

'Everyone was taking stock of you,' he said. 'It is natural when a new member joins a group.'

'Yes.' She firmed her jaw. 'Rather like a performing bear. Is her heart broken? Is she defective?'

He hated her pursuing that direction. 'You're not a theatre act. You're a woman making the best of the hand she's been dealt.'

'I don't want to lose everything. I don't want my parents to lose all they've worked for their whole lives.' She stared at the key as if it had the answer. 'I want to return the favour they gave me by being such caring people. I want to have the strength to do right by them.'

'You do. Strength is merely determination to put your feet in the direction you want to go and not focus on anything else but moving your body into place for the actions you want to happen.'

She groaned. 'You make it sound simple, but it isn't. My innocence has been embellished. As soon as Father left earshot, Mother said someone she'd just met consoled her on having a daughter who could never wed and empathised with the scarring. Mother said she was speechless and I explained to her what the Duchess of Highwood had said to me. The tales have grown with each repeating, apparently.'

'That isn't fair to you.'

'After I considered it, I gained courage. If I'm to be above reproach, then it might be best if I'm seen as a woman who has been dealt misfortune. A little sympathy might open the way for me.'

She examined the key in her hand. 'You were there. The burn. Surely you saw my derrière, just a bit.'

'No.'

'You didn't?'

'I saw flames and you.'

'Afterwards.' She put the key on the hook.

'I noticed a beribboned chemise, and scorched fabric, and that you fitted in my arms nicely and you weren't moaning in pain, so I



took that to be a good omen.'

He'd not really taken stock of what she'd felt like when he held her, but now his mind filled in the blanks. Not with imagined scars, but the feel of Rachael. The wonderment of her.

'I know it is to my benefit that some rumours circulate,' she said. 'But I am almost completely recovered.'

He didn't need to be thinking of her as completely recovered.

'I expect some scarring, but not tremendous ones. I've considered them. I can accept the damage to myself and be thankful I survived. You've helped me accept that the blemishes are just that.'

She inhaled, putting the force of her emotions into it. 'Thank you so much for all you've done for me.'

Falling into his arms, she clasped him in a hug. 'Thank you.' The words whispered against his chest caused his body to react as if she'd touched the whole of him.

She pressed so close that he forbade himself the slightest movement, because any waver would bring him against her.

She burrowed against him and he remained immobile.

He gave her a brief pat, then took her shoulders and gently stepped away. The slight distance he'd added between them made him feel deserted.

'It will heal.' Who cared about the scarring? She was alive and he needed to leave so he could stop thinking about how alive they were and how wonderful it would be to be alone with her in a forest with a moss-covered bed. Or any quiet place where they would not be disturbed. He imagined himself able to watch her for hours, much like da Vinci would have looked at one of the women he painted.

'You know, I'd considered the dark before. If I am to wed some day, my husband will never even have to view my *derrière*' She lowered her arms and let out a relieved breath.

'*That—*' he'd not known his voice could go so high '*—is what you are still worrying about?*'

'Yes,' her voice peeped out. 'I had decided no one would ever court me now. Because of my accident. My blemish.'

'Rachael, you can put that idea so far from your head that you need never consider it again. I assure you, from the depths of my soul, that even a man who doesn't care a jot for you will never concern himself with a scar on your *derrière*.'

He might even like it. Worship it. Dream of it.

'Truly?' she asked.

He had to convey the reason for his reluctance. 'I can't touch you because I can't *just* touch you. I can't. I can't treat you like Tenney

did. I can't mislead you and then go on about my way when I wish.'

Again, he wanted to pull her closer, but he dared not.

He paused, surprised at the direction his imagination had taken.

She was a friend, not just someone he wanted to save. Someone he wanted to be with. He'd not really considered marriage, other than as a necessity for heirs. But marriage could be a solution. For both of them.

He had to keep talking—to distract himself with conversation.

'Can you manage another event in a few days?'

She groaned. 'It's easy to say that I will, but I can hardly stand the questions and assumptions about me.'

'If you must imagine yourself as a trained bear, then imagine the scraps of questions tossed your way are morsels. Tests of mettle. Or stinging insects you can bat into oblivion with a thrust of your mighty paw.'

'Mighty paw?' She held up her hand. 'It's not. But continue with the plans,' she said. 'I don't want the feeling that I had such a miserable night for no good reason. If I stop now, it was nothing but a waste of effort.' She recalled the moments. 'I couldn't even have a conversation with the wallflowers. I was so afraid they'd ask a question I didn't want to answer.'

'Those questions. The ones you dislike, switch the words, and repeat them aloud when they're asked. Give your mind a chance to muster. You'll give a better answer. You don't have to respond immediately with half an idea. But you can't be offended. You have to give people the benefit of the doubt even when none is deserved.'

'I don't even want a friendship. I just want the evening to end.'

He shook his head. 'You should get something pleasant from the encounter. The foremost thing about conversation during social events is to turn the talk to the other person. Things they're proud of. Don't ask curious questions, but caring ones about their life. You will make bonds of friendship with the kind-hearted people. And with the vipers, you can't let their distance bother you. They will come to you later if they want, or they never will. Don't fret about it.'

'The bonds feel strangling. They make me think of escaping the room.' She half twirled again and he caught her, taking her in his clasp and holding her just as he would a little bird. She felt as fragile as any fledgling, but he'd seen the strength in her and he wished for her to remain close.

'Shush those defeating fabrications. Instead of a captive bear, then imagine you are game being hunted, but you also have an empty belly, sharp teeth and luscious claws.' He pulled up her hand,

drawing her fingertips along his cheek, feeling empowered by her as much as he hoped he gave her support. 'These delicate fingernails are not where your claws are. They are in your head, resting, sheathed—a bite disguised as a purr. Your strength is in learning to use your wits and yet not skewer anyone.' He pulled in a breath. 'It is the intimate joust of human conversation and competition.'

'The only reason I had someone to talk with besides Mother was because the Duchess was concerned about the scars on my face.' She spoke into his shoulder, not wanting to observe his pity.

'You've no scars on your face.'

'Please tell the Duchess, but I doubt you can convince her of something so ludicrous.'

He took her shoulders and turned her to the mirror behind her. 'Tell me the truth of what you see. You've a perfect face. None would fit you better.'

She squinted. 'Perhaps in this darkness.'

'Underneath the brightest sun. You would outshine it.' He couldn't understand why she couldn't see herself as he saw her. If she did, she would have the confidence she needed.

She rotated, slowly, facing him, or perhaps he was so aware of her movements that his mind had captured every nuance of her actions, slowing them.

She stayed in the reach of his arms, studying him in the dimness.

She must be on her tiptoes...her mouth was gliding so close. Or perhaps his lips had moved nearer to hers. He wanted to taste the perfection that she couldn't believe, but which he could feel hovering about her, a caress of beauty that he wanted to touch, hold and savour.

She grasped his lapels and his hands naturally caught her waist. He had no choice. Rachael might topple on to him if he didn't. Arousal thrummed in him and he gave in to the sensation of his body bursting to life.

She touched his shoulder and stilled, except for her eyes.

She didn't take her hand away.

Falling into a kiss was easier than telling her goodbye. His lips brushed hers. Liquid. Warm. The edge of a crevasse. A ledge he would happily jump off of to be with her and he must not think such a thing.

He mustn't.

But he did.

He cupped her head and she pulled herself closer. Just as he was dropping into desire that could consume him, he stopped,

reminding himself of the promise to her mother.

She took his wrist and held his palm to cup her face.

His thumb brushed her lips. 'I shouldn't return here.'

'You have to. I need you to further my survival in the world of society and of business. I get scared.'

Tentative lips touched his and he remained completely immobile. He attempted to be the perfect gentleman. He didn't kiss her, yet he could taste the sweetness and savour the bloom of rosebud lips.

She retreated, puzzlement in her eyes and a bit of hurt.

He couldn't bear for her to think he rejected her. He pulled her to him.

Their lips met, warm on warm and heat on heat beneath their moisture and the explosion of sensations. He clasped her, holding her upright and using the strength from the kiss to keep her in his arms.

Lips tasting of honey, a body fanning his desires with the vibrancy of thousands of bees' wings.

He couldn't stop her and wouldn't. The kiss lengthened and grew into a second and a third and mounted to a fourth.

He wanted to be alone with her. Somewhere no one could interrupt.

Then he held her tightly and stepped to the wall behind him, feeling the waves of desire pushing at him, a pulsing crush against his body, yet he did not let it influence him. He didn't know if sweat broke out on his brow, or if it was all on the inside of him, yearning to be released.

When he saw the longing in her face, he shut his eyes. It was the only way he could control himself.

Looking at her, he took his feelings, the situation and perhaps even the moon into his power. He needed that much strength to keep the moment chaste.

He couldn't release her, or she would be burrowed against him.

This wasn't right for her. He couldn't ruin their friendship. She was too innocent to understand. She'd courted a man who didn't want her to call him by his first name.

He took her face in his hands and the world stilled while he gave her a brief kiss on her lips, the springtime flavours of her infusing him with longings stronger than he'd felt before.

Forcing himself to do the right thing, he looked into her darkened eyes. Words of love rose to the forefront of his mind, startling him with their intensity.

He could not offer her meaningless phrases and he didn't know the truth of them or if they were words generated to please her. He

wanted nothing more in the world than to reassure and comfort her, but not at her expense.

‘I must leave. It’s late.’ He remembered his last words to her mother. ‘I reassured your mother that I would only stay for a few private words.’

‘But I don’t want you to leave.’

She was freshness and lightness and summertime, and he was far too jaded to be involved with a woman of such perfection.

He’d leave the sublimeness of caressing her to the husband she would some day wed. Just as long as it wasn’t that dolt Tenney. She would be best not to associate with Devlin’s friends either. None of them was worthy of her.

He imagined again her lying on that mossy bank.

Devlin would skewer Tenney if he tried to lead her on a path of lies again.

He would make sure to be careful after the next event she attended and he would not visit her afterwards. And how invisible was his carriage parked on the street? He must leave.

He had to leave and stay away, because next time, leaving her would require more strength. It would require more strength than ten men had.

He was only one man. ‘I should be going home.’

She put a hand at his cravat, pulled the loop and slipped it into a firm knot. ‘Think of me when you untie that tonight.’

‘I assure you. I will.’

She shut her eyes and leaned against the door after she’d locked it, and wished he’d not asked her mother if he could visit, but had asked her instead. Rachael wouldn’t have extracted any promise from him.

Her mother’s lecture had lasted longer than Devlin’s visit and had consisted of a hundred or so warnings all delivered in an ambiguous, meandering speech, but she’d ended by waving her hand in the air as she left, with the final admonishment of Rachael not repeating the same mistake twice.

Rachael had no intention of it.

With Devlin, she preferred to make new mistakes.

That knowledge troubled her, because she had been able to put Tenney behind her so easily. Devlin’s presence had instantly banished Ambrose’s significance in her mind. The Viscount was potent to her senses in a way Tenney had never been and she wasn’t certain anyone else would be.

She would have to guard her emotions where he was concerned. For survival. She had escaped a mire so easily, but with him a

romance wouldn't be easily forgotten. It would never been forgotten and she wasn't sure she was in his league.

She tried to remember seeing him out at an event and perhaps she had. In fact, she was sure of it. He'd had a woman at his side and all she'd seen was his profile, and it had captured her imagination. She'd not known who he was. No one had told her his name. But thinking back, she was certain it had been him. He'd been the forbidden fruit with a devilish attraction and she'd closed her mind to it.

Put it far, far from her memory so she wouldn't be tempted to think of man who brought sunlight into the eyes of onlookers.

A man who attracted the attentions of all the unmarried ladies who would cluster in his sight so that he might notice them.

She'd not planned to be one of those women. Known there was no future in it and only wanted a man who was constant.

Obviously, she couldn't trust herself where choosing someone to care for her was a concern. She would be better off remaining unmarried and settling on business. Far safer than attaching herself to, and believing in, someone who couldn't be constant.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

Rachael waited in the back room while her father spoke with Grimsley. She pretended to be examining the necklaces, but in reality, her awareness remained on the men.

Grimsley ran a hand over his cropped silvery hair while explaining to her father that he planned to visit a silversmith who'd trained in France, hoping for some new designs, but her father was reluctant. Grimsley conversed longer about what had sold and what wares they needed for replacement, and her father's feet kept slanting closer to the door.

She stared across the silent street. Two people perused a window across the way, but no one seemed particularly interested in her father's wares. No one had even been inside while her father and Grimsley communicated.

'Do you mind if I stay behind?' she asked her father. 'I'd like to spend the morning with the Grimsleys.'

Her father tapped his silver-tipped walking stick on the floor. 'But I've plans... You can only examine the wares so long.'

He tapped his cane again. 'I know I said you could help, but it's much too complicated for you. And I don't want you disrupting Grimsley's day. Besides, people might mistake you for staff.'

'I'll mostly stay in the old apprentice's room where the ledgers and fixtures are stored. Something to take my mind from the broken betrothal,' she said, throwing that out so her father could latch on to it.

'Well, if you put it that way, I can understand. But you must promise to stay out of Grimsley's way.'

'I will,' she agreed, dashing a kiss on his cheek and nudging him out. She didn't want to give him a chance to change his mind.

Grimsley reminded her of a merry elf, but he was losing the twinkle in his eyes. He slipped the ledger her father had studied under the counter. 'Are you sure you want to linger, Miss Albright?'

'I heard you tell my father what had sold the last week and I decided to discover if I could understand what people like. Why they purchase what they do and how many sales you have in a month.'

'It's not a pleasant way to spend a day, especially for a young woman such as yourself. Rather tedious, I'd expect.' He thumbed

away a speck of dust on the counter.

‘It might not be.’

‘Well, the details can be rather cumbersome.’

‘I want to learn for myself.’ She crossed her arms and met his gaze. ‘After all, I might take over from my father some day and I want something here to take over.’

‘You...um...think there might be problems?’ he asked. His face sobered, losing its elfin quality. ‘And you’re still interested?’

‘More so.’

‘Don’t you think you should leave this to me and your father? You should be protected from doing this work. It’s not right for a woman to have to worry about business matters when she has a household to manage.’

‘I may never have my own family. If I need to, I will hire a good housekeeper. I’m sure you’ve heard that Tenney and I are not going to marry.’

‘I did. It concerned me.’

That jolted Rachael.

He heaved in a breath and his shoulders sagged. ‘It’s not all a pretty sight, I’m afraid to say.’

‘Then we’d best get started.’

He gave a brief nod and brought out the ledger, tucking it under his arm. ‘I’ll get my daughter to watch the front and she can call me if a customer comes in and the bell rings while we’re busy.’

After fetching his daughter, Grimsley took Rachael to the storage room and retrieved another ledger. Once he opened the book and began speaking, his words tumbled out faster and faster.

She didn’t ask questions, but just listened, absorbing.

Then his speech took on a normal pace and he sighed when he turned the last page.

‘I don’t understand how you get these calculations,’ she admitted.

‘You can learn,’ he said. ‘I’ve seen it proven with my wife and daughter. My wife has known me all my life and when I started learning arithmetic, we would talk about it. She caught on as well as I did.’ His cheeks expanded. ‘Better in some cases.’

Rachael examined him. ‘Your wife can understand these numbers?’

‘Of course. It’s not hard once you understand the mathematics. Do you know the multiplication tables?’

‘Mother didn’t think they’d be necessary.’

‘Once you learn them, the figures will all start making sense to you. I’ve a book I’ll share and you’ll just need to study it. My wife learned them. It makes it easier for her to keep records for the



household.'

'I'm sure it's easier than making conversation with people I don't know.'

'That's part of being responsible for selling the wares also. It's all easier after you practise enough. The hard part seems to be getting the customers to stop here.'

'Practise,' Rachael repeated and relived the unpleasantness of past soirées before shoving them from her recollections. If she could learn mathematical, like Mr Grimsley's wife, then she could manage a dance.

She understood that her father's belief that business knowledge was beyond her hadn't stopped her, nor had Grimsley's initial reluctance, yet people she didn't know in ballrooms smothered her courage if she didn't fight to keep strong.

She assessed why. Her father and Grimsley might doubt her, but they wouldn't disparage her with whispers. Strangers could easily reject her. She would have to silence her own doubts in herself to be able to deal with—and ignore—the opinions of others. The fear inside herself.

It was her own insecurities keeping her conquered...nothing else.

## Chapter Sixteen

Rachael put aside the book from Grimsley and selected the one on her bedside table that she'd taken from the shelf in the sitting room. She ran her fingers over the worn cover. She liked this volume much better than the one she'd chosen when she was with the Viscount. That one had been about pirates and she'd not liked the brutal tales at all. She'd only chosen it because it was close at hand.

But this tome was different.

Her grandfather had penned his name inside the front cover. Her father's name was directly under that. Her grandfather had died when she was too young to remember him, but as she read the book, it was as if she'd begun to understand his thoughts. As if she could imagine him underlining the page and speaking the words to her.

Her father had told her that his father had said it was a disgrace to disrespect books by writing in them, but this was one he'd planned to pass on to his grandson and that it had guided his life. If it ever got into the wrong hands, he wanted it known that it was his book.

Her grandfather had taken the inheritance from his father and purchased wares, and he'd worked hard, rented several other buildings and the family's fortunes had increased. Her mother had claimed her father-in-law was a taskmaster who never seemed to stop working. In fact, she muttered that he'd been furious when Rachael's father had wanted to marry her and he had another potential bride in mind for his son...the daughter of a man who imported teas.

She read the title again. She doubted Devlin would ever consider reading such a book, but he could likely talk someone who'd studied it into telling him the best parts of it.

Rachael retrieved her pen and ink.

Underneath her father's looping handwriting, she wrote her name. The rest of the page was blank. Just like her life had been. She flipped through the pages. *But not any more.*

Thinking of Tenney didn't force her into the world to meet people, but the encouragement of people around her did.

She couldn't motivate herself based on revenge.

But imagining her grandfather giving her advice from beyond the

grave inspired her. She'd searched through the pages, trying to read each scored section once and then twice. Messages that her grandfather had planned to pass to a grandson, but now she studied them.

She put the book away to prepare for the night's event. A business endeavour in fine clothing. A duel not to the death, but to the life of a venture.

When her hair was in place, her lips stained and everything about her appearance double-checked, she dismissed her maid.

Fluffing out her sleeves, she contrasted the feel of the garment to that of her day dresses.

Her sleeves were scratchy against her shoulders because buckram underneath made them flounce out. The scratchiness made her feel that her dress was armour-strong and she carried it well.

When she looked in the mirror, she could at least recognise herself more easily than she had before.

She touched the glass. She had to get to know this woman.

The dress, one she'd never worn before, hardly stood out.

The plan was that she could wear something she was comfortable in and its basic design would accentuate many different styles of jewellery.

She swirled, testing the dangling emerald and pearl earrings as they bounced against her jawline.

She wondered if butterflies ever longed to be a caterpillar again and decided they must. To grow wings and be buffeted about by the winds would be more taxing than squirming about attaching to stems and the underside of leaves. But butterflies were made to land on the flowers and fly into the blue above.

Again, she pulled at the top of her sleeves, arranging them to their full puffiness. She'd liked being hidden, but it wouldn't bring the results she needed.

When she walked into the soirée, the uneasiness in her stomach was the only thing about her that didn't feel perfect.

She clamped her teeth together, gave herself strict instructions to smile, not to catch on fire and to live until the end of the night. If she completed those three tasks, she would consider the event a success.

The bauble on her wrist sparkled, a woman decked in stones instead of munitions. She smiled. She must not even take a sip of wine. Well, she decided, one more and pretended being at ease, only letting the drink moisten her lips. The bracelet slid from her wrist almost to her elbow, and she lowered her glass slowly,

enjoying the reverse glide of smooth metal against her skin.

Then she touched the necklace and interlaced her fingers through the chain before dropping the warmed links.

So much better than chainmail to wear into this battle.

She saw another wallflower. She would introduce herself to the woman and then find another person to meet. It didn't matter if the woman liked or disliked her. This wasn't about making friends. It was about survival. About battle.

And being able to conduct herself at a soiree successfully. Which she could do. She saw Devlin. She would prove it. And she could demonstrate it to him. She would flutter around like a butterfly without an attachment to any one flower. She would introduce herself to the wallflowers and older women and any woman who stood alone. She would dance with her father and with Payton, and she would practise being at ease.

She reduced her aspirations. She stood still to avoid spilling her wine.

Devlin looked so confident, relaxed and laughing, and so were the people around him. She envied his composure and then he glanced around the room, saw her and, with just the smallest nod, welcomed her.

She wanted Devlin to be proud of the strides she'd made, because he had helped her. Encouraged her.

She didn't mind being a wallflower any more because Devlin understood her true purpose. She was there to showcase her jewellery and again she lifted a drink to her mouth, pretended to sip, and let the bracelet slide. She had to admit, most of the ladies had more elegant dresses, but few could match her in gemstones.

The night meandered on and, during a lull between the dances, she felt a presence at her side and knew without turning that it was Devlin.

'I barely untied my cravat in time to attend,' the rich baritone teased, causing sparkles of pleasure.

'I'm happy I didn't tie it in two knots then.'

'You seem more relaxed,' he said.

'An act.'

'Acting is not all bad. Payton and I both became fascinated with the stage once. Not so much the plays, but the actresses. When they spoke of their trade, I realised that some of them were in a performance at all times they were with me. Perhaps in their lives. I accepted it as a ritual of society that is necessary for us all. That's why I tell you to do it at the soirees.'

'It's tiresome. Pretending to be happy when you weren't born to

flutter about.'

'You were never born a creature to stay hidden.'

'Perhaps that is why it didn't happen. Perhaps the accident was fortunate all the way around. It saved me from Tenney.' Their eyes locked. 'And you from mindless chatter. It gave you a project. Me.'

He raised his glass slightly in her direction. 'A gamble with the same odds Payton accepts at the gaming table. An assured win.'

Devlin watched the guests, aware that the woman his father had once courted was in attendance.

He'd been surprised that his father had fancied her. Her gown was dull and made her look older than her years and she had woebegone jowls. Not at all the spitfire his mother could be.

'A woman my father once courted is here tonight. He led her to believe they were going to marry, but didn't propose. He decided he'd made a mistake and asked my mother to wed that week. He married within days.'

He'd heard the ever so polite but still vitriolic mentions when his mother spoke of it to his father. She'd not been aware he'd been courting the other woman and found out within days after their wedding. The former sweetheart had called on his mother to offer felicitations.

He'd not known about it until he'd heard his father laughing with a few friends about the error of his ways and the explosion the Countess had unleashed on him when he'd returned home. The insouciance had startled Devlin. 'My uncle told me about it when I asked him. I'd heard Father's side and I didn't want to ask Mother.'

His uncle had said the bungled proposal was merely a ripple in the pond of the Earl's indiscretions.

'Father has had many mistresses, but only one wife.'

'Spare me the nobility of that one,' she said. 'I now detest your father.'

'So did Mother for most of my childhood. But they seem to have reached an agreement of sorts. They never have hot-tempered discussions now. He's mellowed. And I rarely have a cross word with Father either. We have mostly left our own angry shouting matches by the wayside.'

'You're his son. That's the way it should be.'

'A title bestowed by birth.'

'You should value those titles.'

'Some come with estates. Some don't. I'm far better off to look at them as they are than to try to wish them into what they're not. And I don't.'

'That's cold, when it's family.'

‘Depends on how you comprehend it.’

‘How do you find me?’

‘Your betrothed treated you badly and I want you to show everyone that he was a dolt.’

‘Are you trying to absolve your father’s indiscretions when you assist me? Or are you atoning for the women who expected more than a friendship from you?’

‘Or a third suggestion. You fascinate me.’ He gauged her reactions to his words. ‘But we both could be playing with fire.’ His gaze locked on her. ‘And you know how it burns.’

Music started. He asked her with a flick of his brows if she wanted to dance and she held out her elbow for him to lead her forward.

She spoke as they waited for the dancers to line up. ‘Fire makes swords stronger.’

‘You escaped it once. I wouldn’t want you to be hurt a second time.’

The dance started, bringing them closer. She spoke. ‘But artillery is usually iron, or steel—metal stronger than flesh and bone.’

‘Not yours.’ He gave her the elaborate bow the dance required and as they raised their hands to touch, he led her in a circle. ‘If you only ever listen to one bit of advice in your life, then listen to this one. You shouldn’t play with fire when your heart is involved. It’s not a gamble, it’s a jump from a place of safety into an abyss.’

Rachael was no longer aware of the others at the dance. Devlin took so much space in her mind that it couldn’t comprehend anyone or anything else at that moment.

‘I commend you for the warning,’ she said. ‘But I expect you to know that people rarely heed cautions.’

‘I’m not interested in how other people react. Only you.’

‘What’s one more gamble?’ she asked. ‘When I am undertaking a struggle to learn the multiplication tables.’

‘I would hope I rate higher than that.’

‘You do.’

He waited until they were at the end of the line and kept his voice low. ‘Might I call on you again? As I did last time? The same time? Tomorrow night?’

‘Yes,’ she answered softly.

They parted in the steps and when they were at the end of the line again, he spoke. ‘Did you notice that the Duchess of Pendleton is here? The woman you mentioned when you were thinking of someone to emulate?’

‘Yes. I noticed. She is an inspiration. You cannot miss her.’

Then he glanced at the Duchess, unsmiling. 'I knew her when she was just plain Meg.'

When the dance ended, Devlin deposited her near some of the other couples he knew and managed to get her included in the conversation before he left.

Rachael didn't say a word, but followed her mother up the stairs after they'd arrived home. Her father had taken a detour by the kitchen.

At the top of the stairs, the older woman turned and interlaced her arm through Rachael's. 'I saw you dancing with Devlin. I trust you to be sensible. If he is anything like his father, he isn't at all reliable. Do take care with your reputation.'

'I know. I know the risk I take.' They stopped in the hallway and Rachael pulled away from her mother.

'Then why do you take it?'

'He may have saved my life once.'

'A nice thank-you letter to his mother would suffice. I took care of that for you.'

'And he's giving me support as I put Mr Tenney behind me and he's helping me feel comfortable among the *ton* so I can be an ambassador for Father's undertakings.'

'I've never regretted marrying your father.' Her mother reached to Rachael, combing an errant lock behind her daughter's ear. 'But if I had wed differently, you might have had a stronger place in society.'

'I'm completely happy with the way things have worked out.' Except perhaps she might have liked to have been in Devlin's social world. Someone he'd known all of his life and might consider like he'd—he'd thought of plain Meg.

Her mother put her hands in a prayer-like clasp and touched her forefinger against her lips. 'Are you sure?'

'I'm reading Grandfather's book.' That was true. And the life she was destined for. The life she promised herself she would have.

'You should not be reading that. It is not for women. Besides, your grandfather didn't approve of me and the man noted I was too high-born for his son. Perhaps that is why I can't discourage you with Devlin. You belong in that world, Rachael, even if you don't know it.'

'If Grandfather had lived longer, been as wise as everyone says, and known you better, he would have thought you perfect.'

'I'm not sure.'

'I have a duty to continue his legacy.'

'Your duty is to follow in my footsteps. To have children and to

be a mother. What could be more important than that?’

She didn’t want to tell her mother that providing for her parents could be foremost in her mind. ‘I will always have your example in my heart.’

‘Then surely you don’t want to spend one second thinking about the drudgery that Grimsley handles?’

‘I do. Our largest sales are to people who live in the best houses, but I think we can get many smaller ones by also creating a welcoming place for people of middling fortunes.’

Her mother grimaced. ‘You sound like your grandfather. I used to hate when he would visit and all he would want to do is talk with his son about the shops. Your father put up with it out of duty.’

‘I wish I had known my grandfather.’

Her mother put a hand on Rachael’s shoulder. ‘He rather liked his own way. Much like the rest of us. Even you. That may have been why you accepted Tenney. He didn’t disturb your life.’

‘I seriously considered Mr Tenney and concluded he wanted the same goals for us that I had. So, I erred tremendously. I tried to do everything exactly right and did as I believe I was destined. And that ended in a heap of nothing.’

‘He thinks you were scarred by the accident. I’ve heard the rumours. I have tried to quash that, but everyone believes I am merely defending my daughter.’

‘Oh, please, let them believe that.’ It would keep others from speculating on her family’s finances.

‘I would like to have discovered that Tenney would have placed me above everything else in life...at *least* before marriage,’ Rachael continued. ‘I have been fortunate to discover how shallow he is.’

‘But now you’re acquainted with the Viscount. He may not be any more substantial than Mr Tenney.’

‘He’s far more aware than Tenney. He sees me as a person. Not a wife.’

The room was silent.

Her mother answered slowly, ‘A wife is such a bad thing?’

‘I didn’t mean it that way. I only meant I waited years expecting marriage. I don’t want to fall into a mire a second time. I like the Viscount. He is a friend.’

‘If he just wants companionship, he should get a puppy. But do as you wish.’ She shook her head. ‘You will anyway, I suspect. Again, you are like your grandfather. My husband’s family concluded I would beggar him and my family perceived him beneath me. But we loved each other and have had so much happiness. So, I can’t tell you what to think. If either your father or I had taken our



parents' advice, we would never have married.'

'Don't worry.' She put her arms around her mother's shoulders and drew her close for a second.

Her mother patted Rachael's elbow.

'I know the risks,' Rachael said.

'I hope you tread carefully and know I will always be here for you. I like the Viscount much better than Mr Tenney and not only because he saved your life. But I fear he is not as insincere as he lets on and that, perhaps, is what worries me. Perhaps he is deep enough to make you love him, but not deep enough to return the feelings as you deserve.'

'Would you think less of me if I told you that I wish to be selfish? If a man can leave his feelings behind, then I should be able to also.'

'You aren't like that.'

She paused. 'I want our family to be a financial success more than ever before. That is what I want more than anything. That will give me purpose and make me proud to be a spinster.'

'Don't use him to get more business for your father.'

'Devlin is agreeable to it. We may meet at some point to discuss it.'

'Rachael.' Her mother gasped the word.

'I like him, Mother, and he is straightforward with me and I am honest with him. Perhaps we are two of a kind.'

'Now I will not sleep a wink.'

'You can sleep peacefully.'

'Plubbt...' her mother gasped. A garble. 'I'm not that forgetful. I know what it is like to be young.' She turned, her face hidden. 'But I understand.'

'Don't worry.'

Her mother dotted a handkerchief to her forehead. 'I'll worry. His father has a chipped tooth.'

## Chapter Seventeen

The next night Rachael crept down the stairs, holding a lamp and a plate of biscuits, and a pencil and paper were tucked into the book under her arm. She'd left her book of Byron's poetry behind.

She unpacked her bounty and sat by the entryway in the overstuffed chair, prepared for a night of reading.

The butler heard her and appeared, giving her one of those *I know what you're about* glances and she tried to answer with a *so do I*, but it had more of a waver in it. 'I will be fine.'

He hesitated.

'I expect to inherit this home some day,' she said. He left.

Rachael lifted *The Complete English Tradesman*, but couldn't concentrate on it.

She hoped she knew what she was doing. For the past two days she had studied ledgers and multiplications and cosmetics. The new understanding of the ledgers had jarred her and she needed comfort and couldn't find it in a pot of lip stain.

She needed to feel Devlin's strength and assuredness that everything would work out. And it might not. If her father lost everything, she and her mother would as well. Then she would have to marry for money and whoever she married would always wonder if she'd have chosen him if her fortunes hadn't changed.

The business had to succeed.

She considered whether she would have liked to have lived in a way that the words *mad, bad and dangerous to know* could have applied to her, even if they were exaggerated, and decided she wouldn't.

She was reserved, restrained and asleep before nine.

But it was well past nine.

She'd eaten one and a half biscuits and read part of a chapter when she heard the pattern of raps.

A knock sounded and echoed in the empty entryway. She paused. It would change the course of her life for ever if she didn't move. It would be the safest thing. And she could endeavour to get invitations through her mother's relatives.

But then it was as if her heart had stopped beating.

She leapt to her feet and opened the door. He stood there, a dark shadow with an emotionless face that told her more than if he had

smiled.

Her pulse pounded and her mind raced so fast everything else slowed by comparison. Her body responded to him, every feeling heightened—from the tips of her toes to her fingers to her breathing.

His eyes—the ones she thought lacked emotion—didn't.

He stood, strong enough to hold the ribbons of two horses going opposite directions and keep them steady, a man whose body had been naturally created for strength, and who was so used to it that it couldn't be imagined any other way. She could have spent all her life imagining a man built to perfection and her mind would never have been able to conjure Devlin.

His face was recently shaven, as if he'd known that the morning one wouldn't last throughout the night.

She closed the door behind him.

Her composure faltered and she retreated into her manners. She reached for the plate. 'Have a biscuit,' she said.

He picked up the lemon one she'd half eaten. 'I take it you didn't like this one?'

'Yes. No.' She heard herself and ducked her head.

He popped it in his mouth, chewed once, then swallowed. 'Thank you.'

'Mother mentioned that your father has a chipped tooth and I should remember it.'

'She was warning you about my family's trials,' he said. 'Rumour has it that a man had the audacity to throw a teapot at an earl, chipping a tooth.'

'That's wrong.'

'Father said he shouldn't have been at the man's house, in the wife's room, having tea, with the husband gone for the night.'

'Tea.'

'Yes. Truly. Tea and biscuits.'

'That must have been tense.'

'Father said it is not to be repeated. He was thankful the tea had cooled and that they had not been polishing a broadsword.'

Silence lengthened between them and she wanted to end it.

She bit her lip. 'I wonder if the teapot was one produced for us. One should always check the marking on a teapot,' she said. 'One wouldn't want to throw one of inferior quality.'

'I doubt he paid any attention. He was more concerned with escaping with all his parts intact. I think it changed his perspective.'

'Then I'm pleased a teapot could help change someone's life.'

A silence drifted between them again and she touched his sleeve.

'Thank you for the efforts to make me more comfortable in society. I view it as an act with everyone in on the performance.'

He gave a nod of approval.

'Your mother guided me after you left,' she said. 'She chatted with a few people with whom she expected I might share a common interest and introduced me to Susanna Winston, whose betrothed had died. I embarrassed myself by replying that we cannot all be so fortunate.' Rachael shrugged. 'But after Susanna had spluttered somewhat, she then laughed. But she had loved him and had been devastated.'

'Lord Johnstone. What did you think of him? You spoke with him while I was there and danced a reel with him.'

'Yes. A forlorn lord who'd lost his wife and was just out of mourning.' A shoulder shrug. Words tossed aside with a flip of her hand, but he caught her fingers and she let them rest in his, amazed at how much warmth could flow between two people simply touching.

'He's not a bad sort.'

'He gulped away tears when he spoke of his lost wife, but then a peach tart distracted him.'

'That's Lord Johnstone. The one and only.' Their clasped fingers rested between them and he ran a fingertip over the knuckles of her hand. 'He would likely wed you if you pursued him and threw in a few confectioneries.'

'Contrary to what the world thinks, marriage is not my goal.' She contemplated. 'Which is good for me. Everyone thinks I'm attending to society because of the broken betrothal. Not because of the vagaries of business.'

'Spoken like someone with an eye to commerce.'

'Did you enjoy the evening?' She had to know. After he'd slipped away, she doubted he'd returned home. But that was his way of life. What she would expect of him. Not to spend his nights doing something that might be admirable, but something entertaining.

'A little long. A little dull after I left the party.' He looked at her as if to say *after he'd left her*. 'I'd promised to finally make good on my promise to Payton to join a few card games. Some drink. Light stakes.'

This time she didn't move closer to him, but she didn't have to. Only their hands were touching, but it felt as if they were one person.

He shrugged. 'Payton was there so I knew not to wager much. The odds are not in favour of anyone who bets against him. I mainly played to watch him win. An attempt at trying to work out

how he does it.'

'You relish gambling?'

'No. I enjoy the camaraderie, but even that bores me sometimes. It appears I'm gracious when I'm winning and leave, but I'm not. I'm just doing what I wish and everyone assigns me good motives. I'm always assumed to have the best of intentions.

'It's true.' His face was towards her. 'The perfect society events usually fascinate me for the first hour or so, and after I've spoken with everyone I leave, ready to search out friends for more revelry. I enjoy them immensely at first, get bored, then I want to find something else. Often, of late...' he chuckled, an inward jab at himself '...I sometimes just long for my own bed and my own pillow.'

Perhaps he was more of a homebody than she expected. Not entirely the devil-may-care man he appeared. Or, perhaps, he just knew so well what to say.

'The first dance that I attended with you there... I can't think it bored you.'

'The night rather grabbed me by the throat.' He regarded the floor, shaking his head before giving her a gaze followed by a commanding glare. 'Don't do that again.'

'Once you've experienced it, it doesn't bear repeating.'

'It was a living nightmare. What if I hadn't been there? I was so grateful I'd promised Mother I'd stay until the end. I hadn't wanted to. But I knew it meant a lot to Mother, particularly as my brothers left earlier. The longest night of my life was in the seconds I ran across the room.'

'I didn't really comprehend what was going on.' It wasn't the longest night of her life. It was a second, a flash, the Viscount throwing his body against her and people staring. She'd really not understood what was happening, except she was in pain and everyone was aghast. A secret that she hoped to take to her grave was that she'd almost slapped him, except somewhere deep in her brain she'd had a realisation that he had just saved her.

'That night, later, I woke up, the enormity of what had happened blasting into me. And the scent you wore. Even with the toasted silk around you, it was as if you smelled of a summer day's innocence.'

She held her wrist in his direction. 'The same perfume I'm wearing now.' Nothing special. 'I couldn't believe—and can't—after all that has happened—you were interested in what my hair smelled like. I could give you a bottle of the mixture.'

He took her hand in the same way he'd clasp a dandelion stem, not wanting to disperse the fluff. He lifted her closer, her arm

rising, and he kissed the little hollow opposite her elbow.

She was off balance and only in place because of his strength.

‘It would never be so enticing in a bottle. Never. Or never on another woman.’ He took his time, rubbing his cheek along her skin, letting the bristles rub against her. She stilled. Savouring. Breathing. He had some power over her body that she’d never experienced before. When he’d rescued her, he’d changed the connection between them for ever. She understood now the legend of owing your life to the person who’d saved you.

It was not based in fact, but in the emotional realisation that the person had given you the opportunity to live another day.

‘I didn’t even know you, but within a few moments, I’d always known you,’ he added, reflecting her unspoken words. ‘Almost that we were a part of each other. I’d never been so close to a woman before in such a short time.’

She knew what he meant. Could see it. Just an honest statement from him filled with nothing but the truth. And she’d experienced the same connection with him.

‘I’m grateful.’ She filled her body with a breath, freeing her from the emotional hold he’d captured her with and she could have stepped further from him, but she didn’t want to.

With a caress, he released her wrist. ‘I remember that giant ring,’ he said. ‘You stared at it as if someone you cared about had given it to you. I envied the person who’d captured your attention so wholly and I couldn’t ignore you. Probably why I realised you were in danger. My senses had heightened where you were concerned, almost blurring out anything not connected to you.’

He laughed softly. ‘Later, I woke up thinking of you. Hoping you would be in the library. Disappointed at first you weren’t. Then surprised by you and the relief I felt. On the inside, I could have wept for joy. You were basically unharmed and you were also mortal. Not a dream I had imagined. I’d begun to wonder if I had conjured the intensity I’d experienced around you.’

He released her hand and walked to the butler’s entrance and even though the space grew between them, the expression on his face kept them close. ‘It was as if I’d only been born for that act of putting out the fire. That’s how I feel.’

‘So, now, do you join a monastery, or will you drink to the sunrise every morning?’

A shrug. ‘Neither.’ He straightened his coat sleeve. ‘When I schooled you on how to act, it seemed I was teaching you that the things I’d always been most comfortable with were little more than a charade at life. Without either of us intending it, you are changing

my life as well.'

Then he raised his eyes to her and he smiled, a reflection of trust and admiration that could erase all the mistakes he'd ever made. 'When I held you in my arms, I could feel your heart beat. With my entire body. I could feel every nuance of your skin. I didn't know anyone could feel like silk and velvet and...'

She knew what he meant when he said he'd seen her across the room and she'd captured his attention in a way no one else had. He'd faded everything else in the world.

'Or perhaps I'm feeling the loneliness caused by all the years of thinking of myself first.'

Silence flowed like soft music and the flickering light danced around them.

'If you've spent your life thinking of yourself first, perhaps you need to get a dog.' She remembered what her mother had said. 'They're faithful. And they don't judge.'

And much safer for her if he chose something besides her to shower his attentions on.

'And you? Do you judge?'

'Yes.'

'Then I'm surprised you let me in.'

'I don't judge harshly. Not among friends.'

She moved to him. Soft. Easily. Unable to stop.

'You might reconsider that.' He touched her hair and leaned closer, his breath against her lips.

'I have lived my whole life without taking risks and they found me. I think I should take a few of my own choosing,' she said. 'I'd like to take a gamble with you.'

'That's something else you might wish to reconsider.'

## *Chapter Eighteen*

He saw the moment she took his words as rejection and he felt the pain as a direct hit to his abdomen.

‘Sweeting, no matter what happens, never feel rejected by me or anyone. If we do not choose to understand the beauty in you, it is our loss.’

‘Easy words to say.’

He moved so close their lips almost touched and their breaths intermingled, unable to pull himself from her gaze and do the safe thing. Leave.

He remembered the partings he’d initiated in his past. He’d have preferred them not to feel necessary.

But he’d used his abilities of persuasion to soften the disappointment. And he’d given kind attentions as he’d distanced himself. The sweetness had melted their frowns and he’d discreetly made them aware they would soon have the chance to toss him a glare or a laugh in front of a new beau.

He didn’t think Rachael could take a gentle goodbye easily. A few more years in society. A few more rakes to laugh with and maybe she would. But he didn’t want her hurt. Abandoned. Or fighting a battle alone.

She should not be forced to make her way in the world without someone by her side. It wasn’t fair to her. Even a husband like Lord Johnstone would be of benefit to her. He could entrench her in society.

He understood that he’d never had to scramble for a footing in society. Although, at boarding school, the boys had insisted he prove himself worthy of their camaraderie. He’d enjoyed the challenge.

The test of matching wits had been a game. Matching strength and agility had been easy for him as well.

Even the challenge of marriage hadn’t always daunted him.

Rachael was someone he wanted as a friend for the rest of his life and her future husband might not accept them together so kindly if they’d had a liaison.

His words were low. ‘You don’t understand what you’re risking. If things change between us, we will never be able to return to the innocence together we have now.’



‘I have already lost a lot of my innocence.’ She puffed out a breath of air that ruffled the wisp that had fallen in front of her eyes. ‘I’ve learned the multiplication tables.’

His eyes narrowed. ‘I don’t think it is entirely the same.’

‘I’m feeling stronger now than I’ve ever felt in my life, even though I’ve recently been—for all intents and purposes—jilted, injured and I’ve discovered my inheritance is little more than dust. I’m angry and it’s no time for me to tread lightly. When I did exactly as expected the results were near disastrous. I should experience life, because living cocooned hasn’t kept me from adversity.’

‘But you could have many more trials. Particularly if you were to take unmanageable chances. We cannot continue to meet secretly. Too much is at risk. Your financial future cannot have secrecy or whispers attached to it. You have to be above reproach.’

‘Yes. I will take care. But I’ve decided scars don’t hurt as much as I’d expected. They’re a part of living.’

The dark walls surrounding them didn’t seem austere, but enveloping and secure.

‘It feels like you’re keeping a barrier between us. Like you’re pushing me, trying to get me to leave.’ Rachael wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her cheek on the crisp fabric of his coat.

‘I shouldn’t have visited tonight,’ he said.

‘I would have been disappointed if you hadn’t.’

‘I understand where our feelings are going, and it’s a slippery path I don’t want you to travel. Too much at stake.’ He pulled her free so their gazes could lock.

‘I’m willing to take it.’

‘I’m not.’

‘It’s no hazard for you.’

‘Yes. It is. I don’t want to lose our friendship,’ he said. ‘And that you think this isn’t a serious step for you concerns me. I cannot take advantage of naive innocence.’

Her fingers hid in the lapel on his coat. ‘Things have happened to me recently which changed the direction of my life. Both of them could have had disastrous results. Marriage or death. This time, I would like to choose my direction. Not be a victim of what is going on around me.’

‘You can’t tell in advance what cards will be tossed last on the table.’

‘You’re acting as if, because I am a virgin, I’m not capable of deciding things for myself. Perhaps I need to be a little more jaded. If I had been a little more worldly, I might not have been happily,

innocently, betrothed to a man who didn't want me to call him by his first name.'

'I don't want to be your method of revenge.'

She stilled, contemplating his words. 'I don't want revenge on him. If he deserves trouble, he'll take care of it himself.'

'I think he does by not marrying you.'

She appreciated the supportive words and crossed her arms around herself, letting her emotions tumble out. 'It's a rough world and I'll be better prepared if I'm stronger. I accepted things I shouldn't have in the past. I questioned nothing. The sun will never rise on another day like that for me. I'm going on my own path now and if it fails, it fails. I take responsibility for that.'

She unfolded her arms and stepped closer again. 'I can't stay innocent for ever. I can't remain in the nursery of my parents' home and watch the other children go out and play and taste life.'

'Yes. You can. If I have anything to do with it.'

'Innocence got me a suitor who couldn't get rid of me fast enough when he discovered I might not have the fortune he wanted.'

She studied him, trying to get beneath the distracting veneer and understand the person with the sincere smile which deflected so much. 'You want to brush me aside like Tenney did.'

He took one step from her. 'I don't want to brush you aside like I did with all the others, or like I have been.'

She stared beyond the distraction in front of her, forcing herself to respond. She made up her mind the direction she would choose and she'd deal with the consequences later. 'You said you've always remained on friendly terms with the women in your life.'

'But distant.' The word seeped into the room with quiet finality.

'You're trying to keep me from being close to you now.'

'Some would say it's impossible to be close to me. The smiling veneer only goes into another smiling veneer, and you can't find what isn't there.'

She walked to the mirror, touched the skin on her cheek and stared. 'The two men I have cared for do not wish for me to touch them.'

'That's a lie.' He stepped behind her. 'Tenney may not have wanted you to touch him—' his voice lowered to a gravelled whisper '—but I do. Since the first night I held you in my arms, I've wanted to hold you again.'

He hesitated. 'But we cannot continue to meet privately and expect it to remain secret. You would risk too much and I would risk nothing. It's not fair to you.'

He put his hand on her shoulders and his head dipped, resting

against hers. The caress of his lips against her neck created a fiery yearning that pulled her against him.

Raising his head and staring into the mirror, he clasped her wrist and caught it up so that her hand touched his face. His eyes closed and he inhaled.

She turned, stepping into his arms. If strength had a scent, it surrounded her, wrapping her in a blanket bigger than any she'd ever find on a bed, clasping her with gentleness and swaddling her in wonder.

'I want you to make love to me,' she spoke softly, but sincerely. 'I know it's a risk, but my life seems full of hazards. And I would like to choose one of them.'

'Then let me show you my home.' The words whispered against her skin reached into her depths and transported her with the touch of his lips on hers.

'My rooms,' Devlin said to the driver and, within seconds, the horses dashed over the uneven road as if they had wings hovering them above it.

The carriage rolled to a stop not in front of the estate, but nearer the side, and Devlin released her hand to jump from the coach, rotating to hold out his arms for her.

He lifted her from the carriage and swept her around in a half-circle before she could put her feet on the ground and she tumbled into him. She extricated herself, looking up into the moonlight reflecting from his eyes.

He held out his arm and led her to a nondescript door far from the main entrance. The entryway had crossed swords on one wall and a case with a map and spyglass on the remaining side.

'It's the oldest part of the house. It's private.'

Inside, the air smelled differently from that the other side of the house. This was tantalisingly male. Leather. Ambergris. Wool. Burning oil from the lamp he'd lifted to shine the light to illuminate her steps.

He led her into a room filled with overstuffed chairs and a large painting of a horse standing at sunrise. A newspaper lay folded on one of the seats and a fireplace took up most of one wall.

He put the lamp on the table and his shadow reached well past the ceiling.

'This is my home, my true home. I wasn't given this suite until after I finished university. In fact, I never plan to relocate to the Earl's rooms should my father die. I suppose I could feel differently later. But I don't expect to. I could be a world apart from everyone else who resides here. I'm out of the family pathways, except for

Payton's because he could find me on another continent. Everyone knows they'd best not plan on sharing this area without my permission, and I don't give it.'

His desire for solitude surprised her and he seemed to want to set her at ease, and the effort welcomed her.

Clasping an arm around her waist, he said, 'You don't have to worry about anyone disturbing us. I've never brought anyone here before, but since we met in this house, I wanted you to visit my suite.'

He ran a hand up her back, drawing her close, and together they stood connected. She couldn't think of anything except his presence and her awareness of the private man.

Something told her that she was seeing inside him to a part he kept for himself and now wanted to share with her.

The kiss he gave her as she folded her arms around him swept her from the reality of the night into a dream fuelled by his lips.

He didn't move away as he released the pins from her hair and let the locks fall aside. A heated, moist breath. A whisper of phrases that sounded endearing, murmured in a language she didn't understand, and yet she grasped the lyrical words.

A moment when his darkened eyes took her in before he pulled her closer, their bodies pressing. Her breasts tingled from the length of him and his hardness urged her nearer.

He led her to a room that only had one shape she could make out in the darkness, a bed that overpowered the small room. He stepped to a dressing room at their side and shadows flickered as he set the lamp aside and grasped the top rung of a chair and slid it closer. She heard the easy slide of his boots and stockings being removed, but she watched the outline of the man, his movements illuminated by a single light that fixed her attention on his frame.

After he put his boots aside, in a fluid stretch, he rose. He should have been diminished in his bare feet, but instead he appeared assured, commanding and taller. He took up the doorway space and crossed over the threshold, returning to her.

A body designed by nature at her best. Perfection in every sinew and plane. Something he took for granted, yet her eyes could not.

He stood before her, and nothing seemed rushed, but as if the universe slept just for them and the night would last for ever.

In that second, she imagined the night unfolding and paused.

He immediately stopped, his hand on the tie of his shirt. 'We don't have to continue. We can cease at any moment you wish. I'll take you home now if that's what you'd like.'

'No. Not that.' She rested her head against his shoulder. 'It's the

lamplight.'

'The light?'

'Yes. Please put it out.'

Immediately he doused the lamp, then he returned.

'I don't want you to see—' she whispered.

He waited.

'My scars. I don't want you to see. You must promise not to look.'

'I assure you. I assure you that they don't matter to me.'

'I—I don't want you to see them.'

He ran a finger along the side of her face, not stopping until he'd traced the seam of her lips. 'You're priceless. A treasure. And you should never doubt that. Are you certain that is the only reason you're hesitating?'

'It is. It is. The only reason.' She grasped his waist. 'It seems so very important to make love to you. To know that I'm desirable and the scars don't matter.'

He lowered his head so it rested against hers, his fingers tangled in her hair and holding them close. 'You can't feel that—that we must make love to prove something so nonsensical. You must not even consider that you are any less perfect now than on the day you were born. You aren't.'

She didn't speak.

'Listen to my voice. Hear the truth in it. The only person who has any right to have any discomfort about the marks is you, because you felt them and you experienced the pain that grew with them. But no one has any justification to think them any less than another wondrous part of you, like your starlight eyes, your lips that taste of preciousness, your hair sweeping silken against my face and arousing me with each strand brushing me. How can any true man not adore your skin? It is a miracle of womanliness.'

He used both hands to hold her head, his thumbs at her cheeks, and he placed a tender kiss on her lips.

'We cannot make love in an effort to make you feel more beautiful, Rachael. I would stop now if that were the reason. You must understand first that the scars are less to me than the smallest freckle you have. Only because they are a part of you are they of any consequence at all. You make them special—they do not diminish you.'

Warmth followed by the hint of night blended with the taste of him. 'Do you believe me?' he asked.

'I do.'

A swathe of his essence enveloped her and her knees almost gave way as his touch fell to her shoulders and then down her arms to

encircle her, holding her. It was as if he'd swept the floor from beneath her feet, his arms holding her tightly enough to keep her standing.

Lips grazed her jawline, sending shivers throughout her body. She caught her breath, awash in the different textures of Devlin against her. The brush of his cheek, the texture of his hair, muscles flexing beneath the skin ignited her body.

He found her mouth again. He tasted of lemon and brandy, his lips open so that their tongues could touch and their breaths blend.

He backed away. She feared he'd changed his mind and she yearned for him in a way that was new to her.

Instead, he led her to the bed, sat and ran his hand down her length, the curve of her increasing the intensity of feelings. She'd never expected so much of his masculinity could be absorbed by her body, just from the brush of fingertips.

He pulled her on to his lap and held her with one arm while he removed her shoes and dropped them to the floor.

She felt like a porcelain doll, perfect, held secure and cherished. Moments she would appreciate for ever.

Burrowing her face against his skin, she breathed in, savouring the experience, prolonging the feel of their embrace.

He stood, taking her with him and helping her to her feet.

His lips cut off her ability to speak and she pressed her body nearer him, flattening into his shape, held as one against him. Instead of feeling a lesser person, she absorbed his strength, buoyed along with him surrounded by waves of yearning.

He slipped his tongue against her lips and passion grew, heating her with a longing that would have protected her from the coldest storm.

He touched her dress, releasing the hooks and slipping it from her shoulders, in one long, draping slide that teased her skin as the garment flowed from her body. In seconds, the corset fell to the floor.

She spread her fingers, letting them trail over his chest, relishing the textures.

Lifting her, he placed her on top of the bedcovers. He finished undressing, his trousers falling to the floor, and slid beside her, lips again touching. His movements created friction, teasing her nipples, sending molten lava sparks inside.

She wrapped her leg around him, pulling him close. His fingers tangled in the chemise and the fabric glided over her head, giving her a chance to gasp a breath before their lips touched again.

Caressing her breast, he moved gently back, yet she felt his

member touching her, causing an insistent yearning she'd never felt before. Then he rocked against her, holding her hips closer, and then again and again he moved, until the intensity grew so that she couldn't contain it.

She released and as she did, he joined to her, moving inside, rocking together, slowing the intensity in his body, and he held her close, but instead of releasing, he pulled away. Then he lay beside her, her name a gasp on his lips, until he completed the moment.

While he held her close, she shut her eyes and rested against him, sated in a way she'd not known existed, and she felt her lips curl into a satisfied smile.

She awoke. She'd had the most delicious dream. She stretched her arms wide and her fist bumped a body. A body nothing like her own except it had the necessary amount of appendages with one more.

'Devlin,' she gasped and saw a fortress of naked male, all bristly and furry and firm, propped against the pillows where he half sat.

Her memories of the night inundated her. 'I fell asleep. I've just been so busy. The parties at night. Learning during the day.'

She had thought about making love to him. She had thought about him leaving her. But she had never considered that she might wake up beside him.

He took the fingers of her left hand and brought them to his lips for a tender kiss, then pulled her into the curve of his arm. 'I could have easily woken you.'

'I was sleepy because I was up so late last night. There's so much to get right.'

'You have people to help you. Grimsley. Your father and mother. Me.'

'I know. But everything is so different. So many changes. Even tonight. It's as if I stepped into someone else's life, but not my own. As if I'm still acting a part. I didn't expect to feel that way. I expected to feel as if I was claiming my own future.'

'Acting?' The word snapped from his lips.

'Yes. I don't know how I should react. What I should say to you. I should tell you I love you, but I'm afraid to. I'm afraid that it might send you away from me. And what if I don't, then it might drive you away, or make you unhappy.'

Instantly, he pulled her close. 'This is not about us making each other happy. It's not. It's about caring. It's about sharing a part of ourselves. It's about not acting, but being ourselves. The true us. Without that, we have nothing. Do you regret tonight?'

'Not at all.' She didn't. How could she regret something that she

couldn't even comprehend fully?

'Then don't worry about anything else. Not anything.' He ran a hand down the side of her body, soothing her. 'You don't have to concern yourself about what it felt like, or how you're supposed to react, but about being together.'

His words were meant to reassure her, she thought. But they didn't. They rumbled the earth underneath her even more. She'd somehow always considered that two people would immediately separate to their own rooms after making love. That it would be something she could reflect on when she was alone in her room.

Not. In. Devlin's bed.

'Are you sure you don't have regrets?' he asked again. The low rumble of his voice floated into the room.

She did as he'd told her to do and repeated the question. 'Regrets?' This time, she contemplated the question and herself. 'I don't.'

She just didn't want to make the mistake of becoming lost in a new world that she was unfamiliar with. Of making a new life that was someone else's.

No, she didn't regret being with him.

But she imagined herself forced into a marriage because she had to save her reputation and steeled herself to stay on her own path. She did not want either of them forced into a marriage. Whether he resented her or not, she would believe he did.

In one fluid movement, he pulled her to him again so that his lips could brush hers.

'I can't promise all that I will say will make you happy and I can't assure you I will always think before I speak. But you will be able to look at my face. You will have more to judge than ink on paper. You will have me in front of you. I will not hide behind paper. Will you promise me the same?' he asked. 'If you wish to end our friendship, say so now. To my face.'

'I don't. I know I don't.'

Her voice was the merest sound that could have reached his ears. Her words lingered in the air like a fireplace ember sparked from the rest and which lay there glowing on and on.

The last speck of the luxurious haze of romance evaporated and she saw herself plunging into another unsatisfying commitment.

Another chance at a humiliating dissolution of a future.

Then a clock chimed once, twice, three times. Then a fourth.

'Four?' She realised how long she'd been gone from her home and on the heels of that revelation others thundered into her brain, clearing the haze that had focused everything so that her mind had



created a whirlwind with Devlin in the centre of it.

‘Blast,’ she said, rolling with the covers. ‘I’m... It’s...’ She gaped at the window. ‘I am not thinking clearly. This was a wonderful, beautiful between us and I wouldn’t have missed it—but where are my clothes?’

She heard the covers rustle and he sat alert.

‘As long as you’re not having second thoughts.’ His voice came through the darkness, reassuring in tone.

‘I’m not. I have to get home. Now.’ She jumped up from the bed, pulling the sheet with her, and wrestled her shift on. ‘Double blast it backwards.’ She switched it around without taking it over her head. She grabbed her corset and stepped into it. ‘Help me.’

She moved to the side of the bed where he sat and turned away from him. She felt the tugs of her ties. In seconds he had her in the corset and she stepped into her dress, leaving the hooks undone as she reached for her stockings. ‘I must get home now.’ She couldn’t fall into his arms.

As she slipped her stocking over her foot, she imagined the murmurs. If anyone heard of this, so soon after the broken betrothal, everyone would assume she was latching on to the Viscount to salve her pride. The very thing she feared when ending it with Tenney.

She gave up on getting the cotton perfect, letting a snarl of it remain at her heel.

‘Rachael,’ he soothed. ‘It’s not morning yet. You’ve time. The driver will wait. He’ll drop us not far from the house and I’ll escort you inside. We’ll be dark shadows walking in the night, like a stableman and his beloved. No one will know tonight. We need to discuss this.’

A discussion. She didn’t have time for a discussion.

‘The maid is to wake me at six.’ She slipped on one shoe.

‘Six?’

‘Of course. But I fell asleep. Where is my other shoe?’

‘Rachael.’ He rose from the bed. ‘Nothing is going to change in the next few hours. You’ve time to leave. But why would you have a maid wake you so early?’

‘My shoe? Did you see it? Never mind.’ She didn’t want to answer.

He bent over and picked up the shoe and handed it to her.

‘How do I get out?’ she asked, slipping it on.

‘Once I’m dressed I will get you safely home.’ He pulled up his trousers. ‘It will look better if I’m not walking along the street naked.’

She handed him his shirt. His being naked would not be a bad sight, but it would certainly not keep the encounter secret.

‘Thank you.’ He took it, slipped it under his arm and twirled her around to do her hooks.

When he finished, he hugged her tight. ‘What’s wrong?’

Instantly, she stopped moving. The tone of his voice tore at her heart. He didn’t understand. He couldn’t, because she didn’t.

She turned, cupping the bristly jaw in her hands. ‘I’m overwhelmed. So much has changed in the past few days. The past few moments. I have to have some time to catch up with what is going on in my life.’

Clasping her fingers, he said. ‘As long as you don’t regret it.’

‘No. Not at all. Yesterday, I asked my maid to wake me early. I didn’t think about...this.’ Six o’clock would give her time to prepare before the tutor arrived. Those multiplications were challenging. Then the tutor would be gone by the time her father woke. Her father slept later and she didn’t want to risk him seeing her struggle and forbidding her to take the lessons. He’d told her before that education was difficult and his family would not have to struggle. ‘I’m having...lessons.’

‘Lessons?’

‘I never really did as a child. Except the ones in sewing and music and dancing. Now I’m having the ones about numbers and sums. Mr Grimsley arranged for his wife and her brother to help me and I am trying to learn as quickly as possible. There is more to business than I ever imagined.’

He stilled, nodding, and she sensed respect, and maybe admiration, in his gaze.

Someone else might not understand how much the Grimsleys did for her family. She imagined Mr Grimsley being let go. Mrs Grimsley without a home.

If word got out that she’d been with Devlin...

She could almost hear one of the women saying that she wished she’d caught on fire instead of Rachael, followed by giggles.

With imagined laughter ringing in her ears, Rachael ignored the wadded stocking in the bottom of her slipper and tried to act as if she’d merely requested a carriage. ‘I must go.’

## *Chapter Nineteen*

Devlin sat in the vehicle. Rachael perched alert, unsure if she could touch him without making the situation worse.

He took her hand and she relaxed inside, awash in the closeness.

‘You’re too far away,’ he said.

Something tugged at her heart. She put her other hand over the top of his, switching, so she could lean into his arm on the seat.

True, she’d needed his support, but she didn’t want to lose their friendship. To become a part of him so much that he couldn’t even see her.

Always she would remain the woman he’d rescued. The woman he’d saved again and then again.

She was so aware of the man beside her. Aware of the way he made her heart warm and her body burn and melt with desire. He’d changed her and touched her in a way no one ever had.

‘You saved me from the fire and have encouraged me to navigate in society,’ she said. ‘I’m grateful. But my gratitude, and your undertaking to assist me, created a friendship between us and maybe we’re mistaking it for something more.’

Yes, she would always be the woman he’d trained to handle conversation. Perhaps he felt connected—even without realising it, because he’d saved her life and tasked himself with making her comfortable in society.

The carriage wheels lurched after hitting a rut, a movement echoing the feelings tumbling along inside her.

She put her hand over his knuckles, amazed at the raw strength she felt contained in him. ‘Our moments together meant everything to me. Something I’ll always cherish. You’ll always be in my memory, but I don’t think you or I could be happy rushing into something,’ she said.

Her blood thundered in her ears and emphasised the quiet walls of the carriage, and she shifted from being with him to being alone.

Her hand still rested on his knuckles, but now she could feel distance seeping between them.

Rachael heard a whispered curse. A masculine chuckle followed. ‘I’ve said that before.’ He turned his face to the world outside the window.

She’d said the words, yet they’d made her feel rejected and a

little broken. And alone.

She couldn't speak for the emotions inside her that she couldn't understand.

The coach rolled closer to her house and he didn't alert the driver to stop until they'd passed it and turned the corner.

He was perfection, lifting her from the carriage as if he'd spent a lifetime training for the moment. Perhaps he had.

Then he rushed her home through the darkness, his touch never leaving her as he held the small of her back.

Outside the door, he stood in the shadows, brushing a kiss over her cheek, asking her if she was well.

She nodded, though she felt it a lie.

'What will you be doing later?' he asked. 'After the lessons. When you have time to yourself?'

She grasped his hand and he rested his forehead against hers.

'I will likely be studying metals,' she said. 'I've told Grimsley to expect me.'

They stood, lingering.

Now, her greatest fear unfurled in her mind. The realisation settled.

She had been jilted by a man she didn't particularly care about. Devlin was different. She didn't want to tie her heart to him and find herself telling him she loved him, and hear the words come back to her that she'd said to him that night. Words about how much the person meant to you but, really, less than they'd expected and only a fragment more than anyone else.

'But it's not necessary to check on me,' she said. 'I'll be fine.' As long as she didn't fall in love with Devlin and stumble off the ends of the earth.

And yet, forcing herself to move one step inside the door seemed herculean. Impossible.

He helped her, opening the door and letting his hand slide from her. One kiss and he was gone.

The butler stood in the shadows with a lone candle, holding it for her 'Miss Rachael. I heard a carriage roll past and thought it might be you, and you'd need a light.'

Out of habit, she thanked him, took the candle and walked up the stairway.

She heard the rasp of the key in the lock and she paused at the top of the stairs. The butler had locked the door and, without another word, retreated to his quarters.

She sat the candle down on the floor and knelt to sit, her feet resting on the treads below.

The butler's kindness to her had reinforced the fact that he, and every servant in her house, depended on her family, just as the Grimsleys did. If her father's business failed, so many other people would be affected.

It wasn't just about the soirées she wouldn't be invited to, the dresses she would not be able to purchase and the trinkets that wouldn't appear.

Many people depended on her father and she'd seen the accounting books and understood enough of the numbers, and the hope in Mr Grimsley's eyes.

Now she knew why he'd not brushed her aside with an admonishment that this was best left to men.

She was his last hope, and his wife's last hope, and her family's.

She just wished to be held in Devlin's arms and to be reassured that all was well. But nothing felt well any more. Nothing had felt safe since she'd spoken those words to Devlin. Words she meant, but had sounded hollow when Devlin laughed.

They had to sell some costly pieces soon. Grimsley had only taken half the pay he'd been promised for the last year. He told her that her father had been generous, practically overpaying him, and he and his wife had needed so little, but the winter had been cold, requiring more to heat than usual, and a window had been broken, and he'd named so many little things he'd had to purchase but which had added up. Her father didn't know that.

Grimsley had had tears in his eyes when he'd told her that her father was the best man he'd ever worked for.

Devlin would never understand what it had meant to witness Grimsley's face. The feeling of pride she felt when someone believed in her abilities.

Hannah Humphrey had managed a print shop and Rachael remembered walking by the window and seeing all the pictures. It had been grand, she thought, and her father had expressed amazement that a woman could do such a thing and sadness that Mrs Humphrey hadn't married and been able to let a man take those trials from her.

It hadn't seemed like a trial for Rachael, but an interesting life and much more fascinating than her father's ownings of mostly pots, and silver buckles and kettles. Even the jewellery hadn't fascinated her much.

Yet now her viewpoint had changed.

Likely no one would even consider her as having failed...as they would have if she'd been a man. She had no risk in that area as she wasn't expected to succeed or even try. But she would always know.

She knew she couldn't do it. Alone.

She squared her jaw. She'd survived the Duchess of Highwood. And while she might not be able to learn the business fast enough, she had an army she could muster to contribute. Her father. Her mother. Grimsley. The former apprentice. Her grandfather's book. Together, they would make a force.

She jumped up and ran to her room, hoping for a chance to read over the studies before Mrs Grimsley's brother arrived.

But with the book in front of her, all she could think about was Devlin and the feel of being in his arms.

Devlin left the carriage in a deft lunge, avoiding the steps while the vehicle stopped at the ornate main entrance as he'd requested. He gave a quiet goodnight to the driver and suggested he sleep the morning away.

He waited as his conveyance rolled into the street, letting his mind catch up to his body, leaving the solitude even more pronounced.

The night air had perfection in it, enhanced by the scent of a flowering bush in a nearby garden, or perhaps his own. He didn't know.

He didn't know what kind of plants grew in his garden and wondered if he was missing out on something.

In the distance, he heard a dog's muffled whine which ended on a whimper, the poor soul sounding tortured. He questioned if the noise was an unusual occurrence, or if every night the animal barked just to hear himself.

Stars glowed overhead. Just as they always did on clear nights, he supposed. And they didn't care if he saw them or not. They did as they wished.

But he knew that dark early mornings didn't usually feel like this one. They weren't so clear. So pristine. Wholesome. Alone.

He heard her words again. *Cherish... Memory... Rushing into something...*

He'd not realised how clichéd the phrases were. They'd been convenient in the past. But now they mocked him.

He contemplated his life while staring up at the heavens.

Even with the disastrous discussion with Rachael, he preferred the feel of the solemn night over the murky ones caused by too much revelry. The world he was created to be in. The celebrations of life. The laughter of others. Rachael's world called to him as well.

The thought that had reverberated in his mind as she'd lain sleeping beside him had been how he'd wanted to see inside the world of other families when he'd talked to the drivers that night.

He'd wondered if Rachael's parents were truly happy, or had created an illusion for their family. The coachmen had convinced him it was real.

He huffed. To merely create that appearance of happiness was a feat. One his own family hadn't mastered easily.

One thing was an unknown factor in such an endeavour. The man he saw in the mirror. How could he ask Rachael into his world when he could not promise her happiness in it?

He didn't want to grow old some day and see Rachael despairing. And he certainly never wanted her to entertain the idea that she would have been better off with Tenney.

He knew more about the social world and she knew more about a quiet home life and had the example of her parents' marriage to examine. Just as he'd guided her in society, he'd begun to wonder if she could teach him about family.

He remembered the feeling when Payton had retorted that she'd probably had her embroidery needles named and his instinctive realisation that if she'd been born into higher society she would have already passed through his life.

Devlin had thought it all for her benefit, but now he saw how leading her into society had furthered his opportunity to pursue her. He'd not considered his own motives before.

Just as it always did, his mind seemed to be thinking without letting him in on the fact. He was grateful it was on his side.

Shaking his musings into the recesses where they would not trouble him, he strode into the house, past a doorway perfectly adorned by flowering vines.

He lived on one side of the house. His father lived on one floor and his mother another, and his brothers were spaced so everyone could take different paths and rarely run across each other.

A well-ordered family.

The butler greeted him, voice groggy from sleep, the servant pretending he'd been awake all along. The overstuffed chair at the base of the stairs had probably heard more snores than the man's bed.

Devlin didn't know why Tomlinson had stayed at his post so late. He wagered the one man knew more about the family's lives than either his father, his mother or he knew.

Yet it could have been dedication that led to such knowledge. He wanted to find out.

He accepted the offer of a lamp to light the way to his suite, his excuse for entering the main doorway.

'Does the Earl tell you to wait up until we are all home?' he

asked.

The butler stood straight. 'No... Not now...'

Devlin waited.

'When you were younger. Now I await your brothers.'

'You stay up to see that Eldon and Oliver are home? Why?' They were old enough to manage themselves, particularly when they were together.

'The Earl. He asked me to.'

'They're with Payton and they might not even arrive home until daybreak. Our cousin will make sure they have no funds left to lose to him. Their allowances should go directly to him. Go to bed instead of waiting.'

'I would, but your father may...'

One foot on the bottom tread, he stilled. 'Is Father home?' When the words left his mouth, he realised how often he'd asked them. How often he'd entered through the main entrance after his night out...to get the lamp the butler had for him...to ask if his father was home. Then, later, to ask if his younger brothers were home.

'Yes.' The butler's words brightened. 'He is.'

He took the steps two at a time, then stopped again. The butler hadn't left the post. 'Why does Father ask you to wait for my brothers?'

'You'd have to ask him.'

Devlin reversed directions and strode into the second lamplight. He smiled at the butler. 'What would your guess be?'

The butler spoke just as Devlin knew he would. Everyone trusted that smile and he supposed they should as it wasn't false, just useful.

'His children. He just wants to be reassured they are still returning home. That they are managing well.'

Devlin remained, knowing his presence, his relaxed question and his quietness prodded the man to continue. What good was a gift of encouraging people to talk if you didn't use it?

'Some day you'll be doing the same to your children,' the butler added. 'On occasion, at night, the Earl wanders down the stairs and asks who is here.'

'He could ask the next morning and he usually leaves his carriage for my brothers. The driver can let him know what transpired.' A ruse Devlin had known his father used to keep up with him when he was younger.

'But I suspect he resumes his sleep easier if everyone is at home. Or if he just hears word that all is well. It seems to soothe him and he rarely returns a second time in the same night. He's said that if



I'm not here, he knows everyone who is supposed to be home is in bed.'

'Ah, we must have disturbed your night so many times...'

Tomlinson answered with brief nods and a smile. 'I'm fortunate that I don't need much sleep.'

'I'll hire someone to assist you so you don't have to stay awake so often.'

The butler put his head down. 'Your father already did and I let the young man help with my other duties. But I couldn't let him take this one. Not often anyway.' His words softened and he glanced up. 'I feel better knowing everyone is safe.'

Devlin thanked the man, an inadequate gesture, but heartfelt, and continued up the stairs. He heard the butler settle into the easy chair. Another member of his family that he'd not realised existed.

He took the long hallway to his rooms.

Who knew? They'd been a family going their own directions his whole life, or so he'd thought.

A tradition he'd not really wanted to follow, but he'd not seen any reason to marry and risk adding another person who might clutter the peace it had taken them so long to obtain.

He laughed in the silent hallway as he thought of his father. Perhaps his family wasn't as disconnected as he thought.

He remembered the thousands of times his father had told him to keep an eye on his brothers and watch out for them, then recited a litany of mistakes the boys could make.

His feet stilled and his mind whirled, racing over the nights of his youth.

He realised that part of the reciting of the mistakes his younger brothers could make was most likely for his benefit and he'd never suspected.

Likely his father had done something similar to his siblings. His brother had once complained to him that they were tired of hearing of Devlin's missteps from their father and he wished he'd not been the youngest because their father constantly warned him not to do this or that because it hadn't been well for Devlin. His brother had complained that Devlin had all the adventures and all the fun and they were being punished for it.

Devlin shook his head.

He'd thought himself watched carefully because, as his father reminded him so many times, he was the oldest, the heir, and he had to set a good example.

Changing direction, he went to his father's rooms and knocked the same pattern he'd tapped on Rachael's door.

He let himself in and his father jolted awake. 'What's wrong?'

'Tonight, I heard words I'd said before coming from someone else's lips and it wasn't a proud occasion.'

His father slumped back and reached out to fluff his pillow into the shape he wanted for his head. 'If we were held accountable for every utterance...' He slapped his pillow. 'What words?'

'The words where you say how much someone means to you, but really they don't mean as much as they'd prefer.'

'To that woman you saved from the fire?'

'Yes.' That his father knew of Rachael didn't surprise him as it would have only moments earlier.

He snorted, slapped the pillow again and mumbled, 'Woman must not have a thought in her head.'

'Perhaps she has considerably functional ones.'

'Surely not.'

'I don't know whether I'm relieved or my pride has been hurt. Or sad. Or what.' He had been surprised at the reactions he'd felt when she'd spoken and wanted to rush out. He'd been incredulous. After all, they were so new to each other.

Next, he'd been engulfed by wave after wave of loss.

With the women trying to catch his attentions, when the friendships ran their course, he'd usually ended them or they'd naturally faded away.

The loss still surrounded him and seemed to be laughing at him in the darkness, calling him a fool.

Somehow, his conscience teased him that he valued her more for leaving quickly than he would have if she'd lingered.

He could not imagine what direction his brain was taking when it hinted he valued a woman more because she didn't want to be with him.

His father pushed the covers to the side, put his feet into his slippers and stood, his nightshirt to his knees. He donned his robe. 'Sounds like a wise woman.'

Devlin didn't think he'd ever seen his father in a nightshirt without a dressing gown, but then he'd never entered his father's room in the middle of the night.

His father snapped his fingers. 'There's a hundred women who'd say yes to you if you asked them tomorrow. Easily a hundred.'

'Not a thousand?' Devlin asked and his father stopped moving and peered around the room as if he'd not seen it before.

'I wouldn't go that far.' He glanced at Devlin and recovered his poise. 'Well, perhaps I overestimated. Ten. Eleven on a good day...'

He took off his dressing gown before he'd even tied it and threw

it to the bedpost. 'Women fall easily at your feet. Just like they did at mine when I was younger. It becomes about the conquest. Not the woman.' He returned to his spot between the covers and picked at them, placing them just so. 'They're all so perfect. Perfect. At first, anyway. It has to be about the conquest because when you get to know them better, they're all irritating. They're all blemished. Just like us. Your mother is the best of the lot.'

Instantly, Devlin reacted, his voice light. 'I searched throughout all London until I was certain I'd found the only woman who'd not be interested.'

His father chuckled. 'That's what I expected you did. Don't worry, son, the next one will be daft enough to please you. You've practically been tripping over agreeable ones your whole life.'

'It was time I met one who's particular.' Devlin noted how easily the smile came to his own lips. How easy to find words that would diffuse his father's irritation.

His father deliberated on Devlin. 'Is that all you woke me up for?'

'I came in to tell you that and that you're tolerable.'

'You're tolerable, too, son. Now that you're older. Sometimes better than tolerable. Sometimes not.'

'Sometimes you're better than tolerable also.'

His father burrowed into the bed, rolled over and pulled the covers high. 'Now go to sleep. And don't darken my bedroom door again unless you need fatherly advice.' He laughed. 'I'll be glad to give you hours of it.'

'You probably won't chance upon me here again, then,' Devlin said and walked over to tap his father on the foot that was hidden in the covers. 'Sleep well.'

'Same to you.'

Devlin left, taking the lamp.

His father's words might have had some truth in them.

He tried to think of anyone he'd ever been unable to convince to do as he wished and his mind flickered to Rachael.

As a viscount, with a fortune at his fingertips and an amiable attitude, people found it easier to accommodate him than not. He really asked so little of anyone. Truly asked nothing of them in most instances.

He'd also fallen into the same trap of the people around him. He'd fallen for his own easiness.

He walked the hallway to his rooms just as he had so many nights before.

He was little different from the barrister. Rachael, as a secret merchant, had her own thoughts and he'd not expected that. He'd

expected her to put everything aside to turn her attention to him.

He'd expected Rachael to refuse to make love until he'd proposed. Perhaps even obtained a Special Licence. He'd truly expected that. That he'd been prepared for.

Inside his sitting room, he didn't stop until he reached his bedside and put the lamp on the table.

He felt in his waistcoat pocket and took out the small parcel not purchased from her father's building. He'd not wanted her to know he had it for her.

Unwrapping it, he extricated the trinket. He'd had the choice to go either to ornate or to the plain. He'd seen the gaudy stone Tenney had given her and known that simple would be best.

Turning the gold band with a ruby stone in his fingers, he imagined it on Rachael.

He'd not presumed she would even think of any financial concerns after they'd made love. His laughter at himself sounded hollow in the room.

He'd not planned on a secret merchant for a wife. He'd known that his skilled man of affairs could take on the particulars of the business and evaluate each on merit, giving Albright a say in minor decisions. Rachael would be relieved—at least she had been in his imagination.

Now he wondered if he'd been thinking like society and not taking her dreams into consideration. It was more than just her dreams he needed to understand. It was her willingness to educate herself in the endeavour and accept challenges.

He smiled. He couldn't help himself. Rachael was willing to take on the strategies needed to succeed, even though she was afraid. She had a warrior's heart hidden inside.

The ring reminded him of the folly of his thoughts and he slipped it on his little finger, then took it off. Rachael had a trove of trinkets at her fingertips and more than likely a discerning eye for only the best of jewellery.

He had no knowledge of baubles, but he did have an understanding of what made true beauty, and he hoped that he hadn't directed Rachael to destroy the true loveliness that was inside her in an attempt for her to become accepted by society.

But he didn't know the real woman, or perhaps he did, and that was why he'd considered her for a wife.

He'd encouraged her to concentrate on her father's business and she'd taken his advice.

He'd not thought how it could change his life.

The old Rachael would have wed him. The new one that he'd

influenced her to be had reservations about a commitment.

The old Rachael would have been easy to please. A keepsake that would have satisfied her of his devotion and care. She would have liked the little trinket and been satisfied.

This Rachael expected more.

Perhaps she wanted the impossible, but he wasn't sure exactly what that was. He didn't know if she was aware either.

The jewel he held was just a token. It didn't prove anything. He walked to the window, opened it and thought about tossing it outside. It would be the second ring he'd disposed of that way. But he couldn't. Not this one. It was the one he'd selected for Rachael.

Then he shut the window and twisted the latch one sharp turn. The latch broke, scraping his fingers.

He held the cold, broken metal in his fist, but the window was locked, and he couldn't toss it out.

He sat on his bed and examined the ring. Examined his life and what he wanted for his future.

Then he slipped the circle on his smallest finger.

## *Chapter Twenty*

Devlin travelled to Rachael's house at near teatime. When the butler told him Rachael wasn't at home, the information hit him like a jab to the stomach. He spoke before thinking. 'Are you telling the truth?'

The man moved a half-step away in reaction.

Devlin remembered his manners. 'My apologies,' he said. 'I didn't mean that to sound harsh. I was just disappointed, and I thought...she might truly be home and not wish to see me.'

The butler smiled, eyes knowing, then spoke. 'She really isn't.'

Instantly, he realised where she was, gave the servant a nod of thanks and went on a search for her.

When Devlin arrived at the building, Mr Grimsley and a patron stood at the counter, discussing the ornate possibilities for necklaces.

As the man finally paused his conversation to examine another bauble placed in front of him, Grimsley asked Devlin if he would mind waiting, or, if he wished, Grimsley would summon his wife to assist.

Devlin ignored the words. 'I thought you might have another person nearby this afternoon. I am here to speak with...that person.'

'Ah, yes,' Grimsley said and directed him to a curtain. Beyond that Devlin saw a plank door, which hung askew in the frame, causing a thin triangular gap at the top of it.

He rapped and the door creaked open. Her face peeked around the edge and she smiled.

Relief flooded his body.

She stepped back, took his arm and pulled him inside. 'No one knows I'm here but the shopkeepers and my parents.'

He swept in and put an arm around her waist, pulling her close as he shut the door. 'No one knows I'm here either, so obviously we're somewhere else.'

For a second longer than necessary, he held her close, reassuring himself that she still welcomed him as a friend, then he immediately pushed himself away as his body started to long for her.

He turned, examining the room, distracting himself from the

realisation that she was so close.

A desk sat in the centre. A stack of ragged volumes sat on each side of her chair, which was missing a slat.

Rachael didn't need to be in such surroundings and she didn't have to be. All he could think of was that she preferred this over him, yet she seemed unaware of his displeasure, which didn't surprise him. It had been unusual for her butler to notice the anger and Devlin's dismay had faded once he saw her.

He pushed aside the strange emotion of jealousy and let himself be impressed. She was working like an apprentice to learn the trade and no part of it seemed too lowly for her. This would be the person he wanted beside him in a battle.

'I expected to find you surrounded by jewels, not dust, ledgers and fixtures.'

'Jewels at night, mathematics in the morning and this in the afternoon.' She swept her arm out to encompass the room, as if she were some sort of sorceress and the surroundings would suddenly turn golden. Instead of gold, the dust only gleamed more.

He saw the tiredness under her eyes and a pang of regret hit him. Not regret that he'd been with her. He'd never feel that. But the knowledge that instead of relieving her burdens, he'd added to them by keeping her awake longer.

But he would not apologise for their lovemaking.

She put a slip of paper in the book on the desk, marking her place, and closed the cover. 'This was the apprentice's old room. He wanted to become a silversmith instead and Father let him leave. Now, we order goods from him. Mr Grimsley said a new apprentice isn't needed now and we can order almost any metal item a customer wants. We are expanding to have more gold wares and we'll make more from them.'

'If someone wanted flatware designed, for instance?' He should leave, but he didn't want to go and he didn't want to abandon her.

'Mr Grimsley would be able to sketch what you described until he had a picture of it to send to be made. That is an easy task. If it weren't for what you said, about being more visible, I would probably discontinue the jewellery altogether. We make little overall from the baubles, but I'm hoping to change that.'

She paused and he held out his hand. She joined him, her skin delicate against his and filling him with fresh desire.

Even standing surrounded by drabness, she glittered. The excitement in her eyes transferred to him and she took a step and ended up in his arms again.

For a brief moment he held her and savoured every pulse of her

closeness. He'd not known the simple solace that could be found in such innocence and that holding Rachael could make him feel a different person. Perhaps that was some of what she'd felt in the night. He hoped, in encouraging her, he'd made her feel her own strength. Her own resilience that hid beneath the surface and would always bring her rising up like a phoenix.

Then, he heard Grimsley's voice. She'd heard it as well. She drew away and shook her head, lips pressed together.

She found a small box, opened it, and slipped another oversized ring on her finger. He couldn't understand her taste in jewellery. Again, it was large on her finger. Then she held her hand flat and flicked the side of the metal with her finger and the bauble opened, the top sliding away.

'It's for headache powders.' She spoke softly.

'I didn't know you had headaches.' Their whispers kept them close.

'I don't usually. But I sent the silversmiths drawings of poison rings. I asked if they could reproduce it. And I've told them if they have any fresh ideas, to please let me know.' She flashed the ring. 'I found this one. I didn't know we had it. This one is rather ghastly, but I'm hoping for smaller designs, mostly using paste stones so it will not be an investment for the customer, but a novelty. Beautiful rings, however, that would stand alone on their own merit. My plan is that unusual items may bring customers in and then the other wares will tempt them while they're here.'

He took her fingers, drawing her near, impressed with her delicate hands.

'I don't plan to have many for view because I want the women to have the option of having something no one else has seen.' She reached out and when she touched his chest, it was as if they'd embraced.

He could no longer study the ring and he didn't care, reassured to be near her again. 'You think ladies will be interested in something so macabre?'

She nodded, clasping him, causing him to feel that he surrounded her as snugly as the ring fitted on her finger.

'It's like having a surprise within a jewel,' she said.

The words would have fitted her as well.

'Something different and I am planning to have a simple matching necklace and earrings to sell with it. I want them to be as unique as possible, so the ladies will have something to show and compare with their friends. If it goes well, I may offer bracelets which can hold a note, or a drawing or lock of hair from a loved



one. I have two already on order.'

He could feel her excitement and the rush of enthusiasm she had for the project, and it matched his own feelings for her.

'It will also give me something to talk about when I am with others if I have one noticeable trinket. Meeting new people will be easier. I've instructed Grimsley that the silversmiths must use the finest craftsmanship and if the container jewels sell well, we will be able to use gold.'

'What if someone really uses one of the rings for poison?'

'Well, I would assume they can use one of the spoons I sell for the same thing. And they hold three or four times as much. And a silver teapot could be used for poison.'

'And as a weapon. Remember Father's chipped tooth.'

She put her fingertips to her lips. 'It would be fun to design a teapot with a dagger in the lid, I suppose, but again I don't want anyone to be serious about using the wares destructively.'

She closed the remaining ledger that had been open. 'We are planning other unique items. I saw a walking stick with a spyglass as a handle and have ordered one. I asked Grimsley to draw a horse's head on a cane to suggest a man might have a walking stick with his favourite animal's likeness at the handle. If we sell one-of-a-kind items people can talk about with their friends...well, the uniqueness may cause people to speak favourably about all our wares.'

'I had no idea you would take this so seriously so quickly. And have good plans a man of affairs might not even imagine. I'm looking forward to how your suggestions will improve the business.'

'It is like a puzzle to see what will work and I think it's fascinating. Grimsley has some ideas and we've made several lists, trying to work out the costs of each idea and the possible profits. We're also trying to plan large, impactful items that might catch a customer's eye. Grimsley said they might notice the bigger item and carry that affection to a smaller thing closer to the amount they can spend. It is like having one wine for sale for an enormous cost, then having many lower-priced wines that don't seem as extravagant next to the one. And all equally matched in taste.'

She turned, picking up a huge silver urn, running her fingers over the metal. 'This has been here since Mr Grimsley started. It hasn't sold and it might be best hidden under a bed. We thought we could send it to the former apprentice and have many smaller items made from the silver. In fact—' She pulled out another piece of paper. 'Mr Grimsley prepared a list of things we can use to turn into sales with little expense. He believes it will help us while we increase

patronage.'

Devlin was almost jealous of the urn and of the affection she had developed for the business. He didn't want to be relegated to the background of her life. He wanted to be beside her, experiencing successes and failures with her.

He twirled her around, wanting to capture her attention. 'What future plans do you have in the social world?'

'Tomorrow Mother and I are to take tea with the Duchess. I hope she is not overly caustic.'

Caustic.

'Highwood?' He raised a brow in question and Rachael agreed.

'Unlikely. To her there is no such thing. Just pretend it is a sleight of hand with words and it means nothing more. Which is the best way to approach it,' he said,

He paused, then continued, 'I remember recently, the strangest thing happened to me. I was out and about in the early hours of the morning returning a woman home. And even though her words seemed to say otherwise, I suspected she might wish to meet me again. Was I right?'

'Yes. That is, if I was the woman you were returning home. If not, then I think she would likely wish to never, ever be near you again.'

'Do we remain friends then?' The words almost hurt him to ask. In the past, when someone became a friend after lovemaking, it meant they were about to travel different directions.

'I hope always.'

'So, Rachael, if I were to visit tonight, would you open the door for me?'

'You must promise to be careful not to be seen.'

'I will. But few things can remain secret for ever. If romances are kept private, and unacknowledged in the light of day, they are respected as such when only two people are involved.'

'So, everyone will become aware if we continue to meet?'

'Yes. We are all animals with instincts. And people sense when something changes in actions between two people. As much as we might try to continue to act as we always have, it's nearly impossible to do so.'

'If we continue on, do you think everyone will notice?'

'Just the ones who matter to us and the ones that like to spread rumours. So, yes, except for a rare few. You have made another step forward into society. To be recognised enough that other people are concerned about your actions.'

'Mother thinks I am working here so you and I will have a place to meet.'

‘You can never let society know that you are toiling and expect to be welcomed at the finest houses. It could destroy your efforts and do the opposite of what you wish. It would be better for you to take the ledgers to your home.’

‘I will be careful,’ she said. ‘But I need Grimsley’s help and I need to school myself on as much of the merchandise and transactions as I can. I need to be able to understand what the notes in the ledgers refer to.’

‘You aren’t planning to give this up? If the business turns around and Grimsley can handle it?’

She shook her head.

He thought of the impact that could make on her life. On his life and he chose his direction.

‘I want to call on you at your home and I believe it should be in the day, and at the front door. I think it is important to you. To both of us. I will be at your house tomorrow afternoon if that will suit you.’

A romance would have to stand the light of day if it were to proceed.

Indecision raced across her face. He saw her thoughts plainly. She would be risking another chance of her private life being discussed publicly.

‘I will just stop in briefly, if that’s what you wish. I considered your suggestion that I get a dog and one was whining near my house last night. I sent my staff to search it out in the morning and now we have found the right pet for me. I want to introduce the two of you.’

‘You want to introduce me to your dog?’

Then, just before he left, the words that had been settling in his brain and absorbing him fell from his lips. ‘Yes. I thought if we were to marry, you’d best meet the newest member of my family. There’s no one else for me but you.’

Her eyes widened and he deemed she would have taken rejection easier.

‘It’s just an idea for you to tumble around in your thoughts. Not a question, you understand. Just a consideration.’

‘For both of us?’ Her expression hadn’t softened.

‘I would wait for six years for you,’ he said. ‘But you do not have to wait for me.’

He walked to the urn and ran his fingers over the cool silver. ‘Before, I thought I loved someone and when she rejected me, I looked around me and decided love wasn’t worth it. It wasn’t needed. It didn’t matter. I would always be surrounded by people I

could make happy with a smile and jest. And then I believed myself complete. I don't want to be complete any more—can't be—unless you are at my side.'

He held the urn so he could see his reflection in it. 'I have to become the man who can make you happy in marriage.'

## *Chapter Twenty-One*

The butler let Devlin into the sitting room and left to fetch Rachael. At his side stood, or wobbled, his new pet. He reached down to pat his head and was rewarded with a whine and a distinctly dog scent.

‘The butler said you have brought a friend with you?’

She looked at his feet.

A half-growl or half-sputter greeted her.

She gasped. ‘That’s your dog?’

He viewed the bulldog with half of one ear missing and a rather droopy eye. The dog limped two steps, knees stiff, and gave Rachael a puzzled glance.

‘Yes. He’s worn, but not entirely worn out,’ he said.

‘Is he injured?’ She put her knuckles to her chin.

This wasn’t the praise he expected to be heaped upon him for his commitment. But he inspected the beast. He liked Scamp.

‘My stableman found him limping near my house. The dog needs a lot of care. I had to carry him from my carriage. He’s not the steadiest of dogs, but he can rush when food is prepared.’

‘He’s definitely not a puppy.’

‘No. I thought an older dog would be prudent, particularly as he didn’t have a home. But then I saw that he’s not in as good a condition as you’d expect. It is hard for him to navigate the stairs. I think he gets confused halfway and forgets which direction he planned. He needs someone to carry him. The butler has enlisted a stable boy to help. The stable boy is pleased with his new duties. He sees this as an advancement.’

He reached down and rubbed the dog’s head. ‘He’s a bit dotty, I think.’

‘You could have had a puppy.’

‘Perhaps later. But after I saw Scamp, then it seemed unlikely anyone else would want him. I didn’t want someone to think him more a problem than a pet. They could select a puppy and where would that leave Scamp?’

‘Does he do any tricks?’

‘Just walking and barking.’ He looked at her. ‘And those are not always easy for him, but you cannot discount barking. It’s much better than whining.’

'You have taken on a commitment to him. And you chose an animal that is in advanced years and you have added staff to care for him.'

'I thought you'd be pleased.' He scratched Scamp under his chins and the dog grumbled again. 'That's his most pleasant noise.'

'You have a companion that hardly demands anything of you at all. Just staff.' She laughed.

He frowned. 'Scamp is a good dog. I knew instantly that he was right for me.' He reached down again, patting the dog. 'He's got a hint of a rattle in his bark and I suppose his bite isn't that trustworthy. He's lost his teeth.'

'Can he see?' She bent closer.

'Seems to.'

'That's fortunate.'

Silence grew between them and he reached down, picking up Scamp.

'He's unwieldy,' she said.

'Yes. He hates to walk. Even if you don't consider Scamp much of a pet, I do.'

'It is good that you took him in.'

'He needed a home at the same time you'd suggested I needed a pet. I thought it a happy accident.'

Rachael's mother walked into the room. 'I thought I heard a dog bark.' She scrutinised Scamp. 'And I did. Poor thing. How old is he?' she asked.

'I'm not certain.'

'Have you had him long?'

'Not at all.'

'You took in an elderly dog. How noble.' Mrs Albright clapped her hands together. 'A kind gesture. Devlin, your generous spirit amazes me. I'm so thankful that we've had the privilege to know your family.'

With those words, she left.

Devlin shot Rachael a glance, telling her wordlessly that her mother understood.

But it didn't matter to her. Her mother was kind and all the things a mother should be, but she'd been married to a man who truly understood commitment to a family, though he didn't understand anything about business.

Devlin knew more than he let on about the intricacies of making money, but less about creating a true family.

She'd thought him getting a pet might bring them closer, as he learned to care for it and she shared his joy in the new closeness

he'd discover, but now she saw that it demonstrated the truth of a relationship to him. What she saw as commitment, he saw as a need for additional staff.

A wife would be an extra person in the house, mostly cared for by the servants. A family member needed to supply needed family members. Again, mostly cared for by the servants.

She couldn't step into such a role.

'Are you thinking of obtaining a wife in a similar fashion?' she asked, her jaw tight. 'Perhaps one a little older than all the rest and whom your servants will care for?'

'No. I like Scamp.' He cared for Scamp even though he was drooling on his hand. That ought to prove something.

'Maybe she will expect more than to be liked. I would. And she might expect to love you. I would expect to do that with my husband. And if I did, I would not want it to distance us.'

'I'm sure it would not.'

'Are you?'

'Yes.'

'I was in love with Meg once, or so I thought,' he said. 'Truly.'

'Are you still in love with her?'

'No. My first romance and the one I would never repeat. I planned to marry her with all a young man's fervour. I rarely even kissed her. She was too precious. I expected to surprise her on her birthday with a proposal. But the day before that, I received a note. Oddly, within days of the Duke's wife dying, Meg found she didn't love me. She hoped I understood.' He raised a brow. 'I did. Eventually.'

'Are you sure you don't still have feelings for her?'

'Within a year, I knew I'd been in love with love. Not her. I found out she was fascinated with the peerage. When the Duke's wife had died suddenly, within a few days, she offered him her condolences but had to wait until his mourning was over to make it permanent. When I discovered that, I was thankful my father was an earl.'

'But she seems so happy and perfect.'

'I'm sure she's happy and she's perfect for the Duke.'

Scamp growled. Devlin agreed. 'Well, I'd best be getting Scamp home, I don't think he can handle much more excitement today.'

'Will you be returning later tonight?' She heard the longing in her voice and cursed herself for it. She planned to spend the evening studying ledgers, but she would be home before dark.

His eyes took her in. 'Would you like that?'

'Of course.' She stepped closer to him. The dog growled again, forgetting he didn't have teeth.

‘Quiet, Scamp,’ he commanded and, with one additional yap of displeasure, the dog obeyed.

Devlin put Scamp on the floor and closed the distance between Rachael and himself, removing her from the dog’s line of vision.

He lowered his voice, smiled and tried the charm that had worked so many times to get him what he wanted. ‘But not if you’re certain that you don’t wish to wed. I think I’m going to wait until I get a ring on my finger.’ He held his head high.

He already had a ring on his finger.

Scamp barked.

‘You dog,’ she said.

He blinked. ‘Were you talking to me?’ He lifted Scamp. ‘I hope you were because my pet doesn’t like to be called names.’

She didn’t answer.

He turned sideways, holding Scamp’s head so he wouldn’t nip at her, and dropped a kiss on her lips before leaving. ‘I’m sure you were.’

The simple kiss ignited desire within her, but in moments he was gone.

The emptiness that followed, plunging deep, shocked her.

Suddenly, she felt more abandoned and smaller and less strong than she could remember ever being before.

She wanted to accept Devlin’s proposal. She did. But she couldn’t. What if she did and later he changed towards her as Tenney had done? Her feelings were so much stronger for Devlin in just a few days and seemed stronger every time she saw him.

Instantly, she ignored those feelings, reminding herself that he was walking out of her life.

Devlin might have given her the courage, but it was she who’d scrambled forward, grabbing purchase where she could.

She headed for the stairs.

‘I apologise,’ she called after them.

Devlin stopped and turned, the ever-present smile in his eyes.

‘Then perhaps I will call on you again before too long.’

‘Perhaps. Perhaps tonight if you wish.’

‘Yes.’

Scamp growled.

Apparently, he’d not accepted her apology as easily as Devlin had.

‘I’ll see you then,’ Devlin said. ‘Scamp is hoping you don’t wait until the last minute to decide.’

Then he stopped moving.

‘I want you to think about whether you like me because of who I



am, or because I can make people happy so easily. I know you don't want to change your path and I understand that. But I don't want us to marry if you don't wish to try to make me happy. I've spent my life putting smiles on other peoples' faces and smoothing things over for them. I don't want to wed unless it is someone who considers me worthy of the same treatment.'

## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

Rachael felt as if someone had raked a cold, sharp diamond over her skin. She raised her eyes from the bracelet she'd just tried on and listened, returning the other jewels they'd received that day to the bag.

Her name. She heard her name spoken from beyond the door. Her first name. And it was Tenney's voice. He'd always called her Miss Albright. Never Rachael. His voice rose.

Ambrose was just beyond the curtain. She could smell his soap.

She stood, still clasping the bag, and walked to the door, pulling it open. The curtain fluttered against her as she forced her way through it and into the now-tainted air.

Rachael appraised him objectively before he discerned she'd entered the room. Overall, he had a genteel handsomeness. A dimple in one cheek when he smiled might have been the key to that. But he was bland. Exceptionally blank, as if he had toiled at it and it had been more fruitful than usual.

In fact, she could not understand how she'd ever found him fascinating.

'I know she's here,' Tenney said, his voice slithering into the air.

'I can't say, sir,' Grimsley said. 'If you'll give me the candlestick, I'll return it to the shelf and you can leave.'

'Not until after—'

Grimsley's eyes had flickered to her and his arm rose in a halting motion, waving her not to step forward.

'Can I help you?' she asked, her voice stumbling. 'Mr Tenney?' This didn't seem like the same man she'd sat for hours and hours with.

He whirled around and Grimsley used the distraction to retrieve the candlestick from Tenney's grasp.

Still clutching the bag in one hand, she reached her other hand out to Tenney in greeting.

Tenney started as if he felt the same brush of cold diamond that had chilled her. Then he grasped her hand, the wintry contact jarring her. She'd not expected any reaction to him.

He brought her fingers near his lips and kissed the air before releasing her.

She let her hand fall, absently brushing the folds of her skirt,

wanting to free herself of the feel of him.

They had touched so little when they had been betrothed and she now understood why. It meant nothing to either of them.

‘Rachael. So good that we meet again.’ He sniffed. ‘I’d heard rumours that you’d been seen here and I thought you might be in your father’s little diversions...with the help.’

‘Mr Grimsley is my father’s man of affairs and extremely experienced.’

‘So.’ He shot a quick glance at Grimsley. ‘He is responsible for your father’s losses.’

‘No. The shops are doing well and it isn’t any of your concern.’

‘I’m sure. You always had a good eye for beauty,’ Tenney said. ‘When we went on those carriage rides and visited Somerset House, the curator thought you a natural at selecting the best pieces.’

‘He was kind,’ she said. ‘It was no chore to admire the paintings.’ She indicated the wares around her. ‘And when I am here, I feel I’m in an art display that my own family has collected.’

She took off the bracelet and handed it to Grimsley. ‘I think this will suit me. Can you ask Abernathy to design a matching necklace?’

‘Let me see it,’ Tenney said.

She did as he requested, making sure their hands didn’t touch a second time.

‘It is stunning.’ He took the bauble and held it to the light, examining it, one eye squinted. ‘I like it.’

‘Are you sure you wouldn’t like a different one?’ she asked.

‘No. This one is perfect for her.’ He handed it to the shopkeeper with a flourish. ‘Wrap it up for me.’

‘It is a perfect gem,’ she agreed. ‘But we have a large selection.’ A large selection that hadn’t been on her arm first. ‘Today we received three from one of my best suppliers, Mr Abernathy.’

She opened the bag and took out one with a small pearl which was half circled by three diamonds and let him examine it. Then next was a sapphire sparkling against its gold filigree band. She also took out one with rubies set in the silver circle—the stones reminded her of blazing coals.

He studied the bracelet, frowning.

She didn’t want Tenney’s new beloved to be wearing a piece she’d worn first. It didn’t bother her except she wouldn’t have wanted to be given a jewel such as that.

Tenney smiled, returning the bracelets. ‘I like the other best. The first one. It’s not as fine as my betrothal ring you returned, but...’

‘Your family heirloom gave me an idea for some new additions to

our selections.'

His brows flicked up in acknowledgement.

She returned the bag to Grimsley. He gave her the tiniest shrug, put the bag aside, then reached in his pocket and took out a cloth to wipe the candlestick before putting it on the shelf.

Her feelings truly weren't there for Tenney and she would thank him for the rest of her life for writing the letter that ended their friendship.

She was a better person for it and it hadn't even left a scar.

And the scars she did have were only on the surface and a surface that was mostly out of the way and, for the time being, she was thankful for it. The path to her new life had begun that night.

'Since the pastime is doing so well, I'm sure you won't mind gifting me the bracelet,' Tenney interrupted her thoughts.

His eyes told her she had heard correctly. 'I don't think so.'

'You know, Rachael, I have a lot of friends in society. It will not do well to have questions stirred about your past. About your life. About your future. The comments about you breaking our betrothal are just now fading.'

'Truly?'

'Yes.'

'No. That's not what I meant when I said *truly*. Truly, you are going to sink so low?' She blinked and he was still there and still had the same reptilian stare.

That stare worked on her like a snake strike and she reacted instinctively, but she didn't dodge. Instead, she planted her feet. 'Do your worst. But it will not be unnoticed. Because of you, I've become acquainted with the editor of the newspaper. He recently printed that I was a sparkling gem at Countess of Merriweather's ball. And I'm soon to be attending an event where I will see the Duchess of Highwood. We have recently shared a quiet conversation. I'm sure she would not mind sparing more time to chat with me. And she isn't known for verbal discretion.'

She paused, lowering her voice to a purr. 'I would step softly, Ambrose. The people I have tea with are the people you might like to work for. And if you tell lies about me, I will tell truths about you.'

He waved an arm, stepping back. 'You can keep the rubbish. There are better merchants in town.'

He stalked out, the bell above the door clattering as he left.

Grimsley walked to her, the candlestick back in his hand, staring after Tenney. 'Say the word, Miss Rachael, and I will go after him and give him a knock on the head.'

‘I wouldn’t want to inflict that on the merchandise.’

Grimsley spoke under his breath.

‘I believe I will order that ring we discussed when I arrived,’ she told Grimsley.

‘The one for poison powders?’ Grimsley watched where Ambrose Tenney walked beyond the window. ‘I can have it filled for you.’

‘No. It’s not for him. The gimmel one.’

## *Chapter Twenty-Three*

He directed his carriage to halt one house further from Rachael's. The moonlight was bright and he didn't want to take more chances.

He'd been tempted to stop the vehicle closer to Rachael's home and have a shorter distance to walk, arriving quicker, but instead, he asked the carriage driver to find the darkest shadows and wait there.

It was odd how doing something secretively and not getting noticed could increase a person's belief that they could never get caught.

And if they were seen together, and Rachael's reputation was hurt, it would be a loss for everyone. He would never know if she felt forced into a marriage to save her reputation and the shops. Or, if rumour got out that they were together and the business suffered, he would blame himself for her financial disaster.

As he approached the house, fabric fluttered in place at an upper-storey window. He supposed he would be waiting for Rachael to join him. Instead, the front door opened, Rachael ran out and a male voice told her to take care.

She ran to him and he lingered, drinking in the vision of seeing a sprite in the moonlight. Relief overflowed inside him that they would be together again.

He clasped her, giving a swirl and spinning her around before he allowed himself the joy of bringing her into his arms and holding her along the length of him, for one brief sweet, torturous moment before letting her go.

'Who spoke to you as you were leaving?' he asked, putting an arm around her to bring her close and make it less likely she would be recognised while he hurried her away.

'The butler.'

'The face at the upper storey?' Her feet pattered along beside him and he slowed his steps to make it easier for her to keep pace.

'Oh, that was likely my mother,' she said. 'They are all concerned for me.'

'They *all* know you are meeting me?' He slowed again in an attempt to discern her face.

'All except...well, my father may know as well, but be keeping it a secret from me. My mother said she must trust that I know what I

am doing.'

He marvelled at the cocoon of closeness she had around her and pulled her near for a brief hug, reassuring himself that she was, for a moment, with him.

The carriage rolled towards them. When it stopped, he reached to open the door and, with both hands at her waist, lifted her in a swirl of skirts. He kept his elbow out to protect her from the door. 'Lower your head,' he said and she disappeared inside the doorway.

With one boot on the metal step, he pulled himself into the vehicle, turned back and captured the door, closing them in.

He stopped, just to breathe in the flowery, womanly scent that was Rachael and feel the contentment of knowing they would have a few hours together.

He put fingertips to her cheek and let them dance along her jawline, her contours resonating in his body.

Their kiss was liquid emotion, tasting of things innocent and sweet, yet pulsing with desire.

Rachael moved up the stairs with Devlin, pleased that it wasn't a moonlit night, but in his room, Devlin stilled before adjusting the lamp. 'Out, or, as I would prefer, left on?'

She couldn't answer.

'I want you to feel comfortable. But I also want you to be proud of your beauty.'

'On.'

What if Devlin flinched at her scar?

He moved back to her and rotated her body, undoing the hooks of her gown and slipping the cloth upwards. The silk slid over her shoulders, but the sensation didn't calm her.

'You have nothing to fear,' he said. 'Nothing.'

He slid the fabric free, then untied her corset and dropped it, holding out his hand so that she could keep her balance as she stepped from it.

The chemise that had been pressed against her body fell loosely as she moved and he drew her against his chest, the thin layer of her chemise doing nothing to diffuse the feelings he stirred.

His arms encased her, surrounding her with the feeling of the most security she'd ever known in her life. She felt fragile and yet unbreakable.

His moist lips against her skin erased every pain she'd ever felt and she turned, capturing him in a kiss.

Next, he stepped aside enough to remove his trousers. With a delicate touch, he slid the chemise over her head.

His hardness pressed against her stomach, and he slid his hands

down her back, stopping to grasp her waist and pull her closer.

Summoning her courage, she took his hand from her waist and guided it over the scar, holding it firm, making sure he didn't press too hard.

She needn't have concerned herself.

His fingers trailed softly over the uneven skin and he traced the marred area, sending shivers into her that touched her core. 'If it were not for the discomfort to you, not worth a fuss. You're made even more unique. They show you are a survivor.'

'That is kind of you to say.'

His lips rested in the crook of her neck, the honesty of his words reverberating inside her. 'I'm not being kind at all. Just truthful.'

Then he stepped back, guiding her with him, and lowered himself on to the bed, keeping her above him.

'Your scar only increases your perfection and beauty. It makes you all the stronger.'

'You saved me.'

'If I had known, I would have prevented the accident, because I ache at the thought of you suffering. I would happily bear the pain myself, rather than it be inflicted on you.'

He kissed her, guiding her on top of him, uniting with her and leading her into a path of passion and discovery.

When their lovemaking was completed, he slid from the bed.

An expanse of male chest was in front of her. He was completely unselfconscious and that gave her pause.

She'd not imagined herself ever to be so relaxed in front of him, but then his eyes raked over her, with the sheet around her, and caused a heat to soar inside her and a tingling in her breasts, freeing her from self-consciousness.

Perhaps she could.

'Does the burn still hurt?' he asked, while donning his trousers. He sat to slip on his boots before returning to his feet.

She shrugged. 'Some. Nothing bad. I'm careful not to wear a corset too tight.'

He donned his shirt and then his waistcoat. 'Are you going to lie there all night?' he asked. 'I'd expected you to be jumping from the bed and rushing me to get you home. Like last time.'

She pulled the sheet with her and sat. 'I didn't schedule anything for early in the morning.'

'Thoughtful of you.' The words were drawled into the room.

'It is vital to me. To change the direction of the shop. To keep my grandfather's hard work going as he would have wanted it,' she said.



‘Because it’s important to you, it’s important to me.’

She’d not expected him to say that. ‘I didn’t think you liked it.’

‘I would rather it not concern you. I would rather your life have no more worry than what colour ribbon might improve a bonnet and let someone else handle all the rest of it. But I wouldn’t like my life to only be what style my next hat will be and I suppose you feel the same way.’

‘I do. Plus, I don’t trust my feelings. I saw Ambrose today and that frightened me anew. I came within a hair’s breadth of an unsatisfactory marriage.’ She could not admit to him how pathetic she now found Tenney. She’d been so wrong. So wrong.

‘I’m not Tenney. Don’t hang on to his memory to push me from you. If you wish to end our connection, I understand, but don’t use him as an excuse. Don’t compare me to him. We’re not the same person.’

Aligning at the bed, he lifted her hand to his lips. He placed a kiss in her palm and then closed her fist over it. He grasped her wrist lightly and moved it so that her hand touched over her heart.

‘I’ll lace up your corset when I return,’ he said. ‘And then we’ll get you home safely and quietly.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘I’m going to alert the carriage driver to be ready.’

He walked out of the door and she realised a marriage proposal would have been a much better end to lovemaking than having a carriage readied.

## *Chapter Twenty-Four*

The next day, Rachael was summoned to the sitting room. Devlin stood as she rose. His cravat was black and his eyes intense.

‘He ran away.’

‘Who?’

‘My dog.’

‘Scamp?’ she asked. ‘He could barely walk.’

‘I know. He had to be determined just to get down the stairs.’

‘How did he get out?’

‘The butler opened the door to go out and Scamp charged into the street. The stable boy tried to stop him and Scamp tripped him and drooled on him. I had to give the stable boy another promotion quickly or he might have run away as well.’

‘Scamp could actually run?’

‘Yes. At least out of my front door. I can’t imagine him able to get much further. The butler thinks the dog had a flicker of lucidity and he remembered where he belonged. That’s what we hope for anyway.’

‘How can you be distraught? You just got him and you chose him because of his age. You gave him two happy days or so.’

‘Yes. I know. But I feel rather betrayed. As if he didn’t choose to be with me.’

‘He remembered where he lived and wanted to find his true family.’

‘He had excellent staff at my home.’

‘A home isn’t judged by the number of servants.’

‘Don’t make light of it.’ Devlin stared at her. ‘This was a test for me. A chance to test how well I might get on with something other than family. I’d given him a good house and meals, and spent time with him.’

‘Perhaps you could get another pet?’

‘None would need me as much as Scamp. I liked that dog.’

‘You couldn’t have been that fond of Scamp.’

‘I was fond enough. I was proving that I could be—a dog owner.’

‘Maybe you should have started with a bird.’

The glare he gave her would have shocked his friends because they wouldn’t have believed him capable of appearing so cross. She burst out laughing. ‘He just remembered where his owner was and

wanted to go home.'

Devlin levelled a glance at her. 'When Scamp was in my life for just a short while and I was drawn to him, I wondered why. At first, I thought he needed me. He wasn't impressed by me which gave me pause. He treated me the same as he would have an underservant.'

The words remained in the air between them and gently evolved.

'You think that is why you are attracted to me. Because I'm not impressed by you?'

'Yes.'

'Oh.'

'Am I more to you than others?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'That I even considered that question does not bode well,' he said. 'If I don't feel it, then I wonder if you are capable of putting me first in your life, or if you will always find a reason to pursue something else before me.'

'Are you telling me that you don't wish to continue our friendship?'

'No, I'm asking you to make sure you want to. I'm asking you to put me above all others.'

For the first time since her accident, she anticipated going to the dance, expecting a perfect night.

She'd talked to Mr Grimsley earlier in the day and he'd been the happiest she'd ever seen him. He'd mentioned customers had arrived to examine the rings and that one customer had purchased a matching set of bracelets and a necklace. Then a betrothed woman had stopped at the shop with her mother because they were selecting items for the bride-to-be's new residence. Grimsley steered them away from particular specially designed rings.

The only disappointment was that Devlin wouldn't be at the event. He'd promised to spend the evening with his father.

When she arrived at the soirée, her first sight was the wallflower, Susanna, whom she'd met when they'd discussed the failure of both their betrothals. They stood at the refreshments when the music began for the opening dance.

'Your earrings tonight are lovely, but by far my favourite jewellery you've worn was the sapphires at the last soirée,' Susanna said. 'I told Mother how much I liked them and she said she will let me have a similar pair for my birthday. They were close to a match with my eye colour.'

Rachael studied Susanna's irises. 'I've seen jewels that are the exact colour you need. I know someone who could locate some and make earrings like the pair I had on. The stones themselves aren't as

costly, but I think you would be happier with them because people will be more aware of your eyes.'

Susanna ducked her head. 'That's the feature people notice most about me, I'd be thrilled with jewellery to match.'

Then, as she raised her face her expression tensed when she saw someone behind Rachael.

'I hope she doesn't talk to me,' Susanna whispered and Rachael saw her glance at the Duchess of Highwood. 'She always makes me nervous.'

Almost before the words were out of her mouth, the Duchess noticed them and came their way. Susanna cringed, standing closer to Rachael.

'So sad you had to spend the last year in black, but I think you should have mourned an extra year to show you really cared,' the older woman said to Susanna. 'Attending parties is not the way to sufficiently exhibit your love.' She patted Susanna's arm. 'Fetch me a glass of wine.'

Susanna raised a gloved finger and a footman responded, and brought a tray by them.

They each took a glass.

'I told Lady Smith not to plan any waltz music tonight. At first I approved of it, but now I see how it could corrupt young ladies like yourselves, assuming you've not been corrupted already with those broken betrothals.' She rotated her arm, almost colliding with Susanna.

Susanna retreated to avoid the Duchess's glass and stumbled on her skirt hem. Her drink wobbled and she lurched to catch it.

The liquid splashed towards the older woman's face.

The woman shrieked. Half the musicians stopped playing and all eyes turned her way, observing the wine dripping from the point of the Duchess's chin and running in rivulets down her collarbone on to her décolleté.

The last instruments stilled.

In that second, Rachael recognised the silence. She'd heard it before.

Even though Susanna was still standing, her face had crumpled and her empty glass dangled from her fingertips.

'I am so sorry, Susanna.' Rachael's voice rang out and she couldn't have stopped it if she'd wanted to. 'So sorry. I didn't mean to bump your arm.' Then she almost choked when she saw the Duchess's glare. 'Please forgive me.'

She moved Susanna aside, attempting to take the Duchess's arm, but the woman jerked it aside, sloshing her own drink and adding

to the spill on her cleavage.

‘Abomination. That’s what this is. An abomination.’

For some reason, Rachael wanted to giggle when she saw the footman standing, open-mouthed, and his grip locked on his own tray. ‘Handkerchiefs, please,’ she instructed him. ‘And will someone assist Her Grace to the ladies’ retiring room?’

Rachael took Susanna, her voice strong enough to carry to all the guests. ‘I don’t know how I could have been so clumsy, Susanna. Will you ever forgive me?’

‘I will never forgive either of you,’ the Duchess muttered. ‘This dress is ruined.’

‘I will direct that the bodice of your dress is replaced by the best seamstress in London. And, everyone...’ she briefly viewed the others ‘...please check that all the lamps are strongly secured. We must all be thankful I have learned not to stand near them.’

A few muffled laughs answered her statement.

Rachael waved to the musicians. ‘Could you please start the music again? And, everyone, please *forget* you ever saw this.’

‘Awk!’ the Duchess called from just beyond the room. ‘I will demand that everyone remembers this.’

Rachael shrugged, then led Susanna to a man at the side. ‘Are you hoping for a partner in the dance?’ she asked him. He bowed to Susanna and led her to the row of dancers, and the music commenced.

Rachael blew a strand of her hair to the side of her face and followed after the Duchess.

‘I will never forget this,’ the lady of the house said, close behind Rachael. ‘We all would have liked to have done that to the Duchess at some time or another. And I’ll be sure to invite you the next time I plan something. You do tend to liven things up. Please stay. I’ll attempt to calm the Duchess.’

An older man approached Rachael. ‘May I have the next dance? I want to be near you to see what happens next.’

‘Nothing, I hope,’ Rachael said.

‘Well, if it does, I want you standing by my brother. He’s infuriating with his self-importance. It would be good to have him adjusted down a notch and you’re the woman who could do it.’

When her father stopped to take her mother’s arm, she knew he wanted to leave and she joined them.

Before they stepped into the carriage, she removed the feather in her mother’s turban so it wouldn’t be broken on the roof and gave the plume to her mother.

‘Thank you, dear.’ Her mother checked that the turban remained

the same. 'I was watching. I know you didn't tap Susanna's arm. I'm proud of you.'

'I didn't choose to do that. I just had to.'

'Which makes it all the better,' her mother said. 'You're a woman who does what she has to. What she believes she has to do. And, really, that's what makes the difference.'

'It's a shame your grandfather didn't live long enough to know you. He'd be so proud,' her father added.

The words fluttered inside Rachael, adding a balm to an awkward evening.

'I didn't observe the Viscount in attendance...which surprised me,' her mother said. 'Was he expected?'

'He went to the country with his father and Payton to retrieve some horses. He said it was long overdue. He's returned, but I expect he was busy with his father.'

'Of course. Family is important.' She straightened the ostrich feather and put it flat across her lap. 'I can only thank him for what he has done for us... For you... You're not the same Rachael and I'm pleased that you seem so much more comfortable now than you did with Mr Tenney. Take care, though.'

'Father, might I take the carriage after we arrive home?'

She heard the sputters and even in the darkness she could see him puffing up into an explosive answer.

Her mother touched his hand. 'Your father doesn't think it's a good idea. And, Dear One, that's not what I meant by taking care.'

'Before he left, Devlin mentioned he planned to propose when he returned and I would like to know if he was serious. I've been thinking about my answer.'

Her mother sputtered this time. 'D-Dear, you didn't pursue the question at the time. You had to think about it?'

'Are you daft?' her father shouted.

Immediately her mother pulled down the shades in the carriage, although Rachael didn't grasp how that would keep the discussion more private. The coachman had surely heard the shout and the horses had even been aware of discord as they'd picked up speed.

She patted the side of the carriage seat. She seemed to be testing people's vocal range more than usual.

'I could not marry him because he pitied me. Or because he needed an heir. He just said that we should get married and I could not risk another meaningless proposal.'

'Yes. You could.' Her father's voice hadn't lowered. His arms crossed. 'She gets these ideas from you.' He spoke to her mother.

'I was betrothed for a long time to Ambrose Tenney and I do not

want history to repeat itself. I don't.'

'You could have suggested the Viscount obtain a Special Licence. You are too old to be waiting.'

'Father. I am past waiting. I'm not waiting on anyone now. And I don't want to be a pitied victim.'

'Dear.' Her mother reached out, one hand resting on Rachael's and one on her husband's. 'You are not a victim to anyone. You never were. Not even to Tenney. If you remember, when he courted you, you were completely happy to keep him at a distance and wait. A letter sufficed and you were content with that.'

Her mother sat deeper in the seat and crossed her arms. 'You never even saw the other men who tried to catch your attention in the meantime. But almost immediately, when you formed a friendship with Devlin, you were meeting privately.'

'They're meeting privately?' her father shouted again.

'Don't scare the horses and the people in the houses we're passing by don't need to be aware of our conversation,' her mother spoke gently.

'The Viscount is charming. And I do care for him. Apart from my family, he is the best friend I've ever had.'

'And you, my dear daughter, are lying to yourself if you think you're easily led,' her mother said. 'I have no qualms at all if you are to remain unwed. I am all for it if it is what you wish. But do not lie to yourself. You are no one's victim.'

Her father snorted again and repeated her mother's words. 'She's no one's victim.'

'What if I were to marry Devlin and he were to change affections?'

Her father grumbled, 'I would assume you wouldn't even ask for his carriage, but you would just take it and do as you wished. As you have with my London shop.'

She didn't speak.

'I saw the purchases,' he continued. 'Grimsley's suggestions didn't all come from him. He would never have had the courage to do that alone.'

'The former apprentice is so excited in the changes that are planned for the shop. He's offered his own suggestions that he would like us to try. We need to expand.'

'How can we expand?'

'We have the inventory in storage to be melted and reshaped. Grimsley's found another shop location and, if we take it, the agreement is that the rent on the new shop will be almost nothing for the first year. We're to take in an older journeyman at the new

site and Abernathy will work closely with him. So, for one year, it is almost no risk at all, only profit, and we will add to the merchandise with items that we have created from old ones we already have. Nothing extravagant. You make the future profits when you create or buy the merchandise, not only when you sell.'

Her father spoke to her mother. 'Do you think the Viscount had any idea what he was taking on when he asked our timid little daughter for her hand in marriage?'

Before her mother could answer, Rachael inserted, 'He did not ask. He spoke of it as a given. As if it were already decided.'

'Blast.' Her father gave a slap to his forehead and gaped at his wife. 'You always said she would not listen if you told her what to do, but if you asked, she would break her fingers in helping.'

'Just like her father.'

Both parents' heads nodded in unison.

'Can I borrow the carriage?'

'Tomorrow,' her father said. 'I've never had much say in your life. But I do have control over the carriage driver's employment and you would not be able to get a hackney tonight. It would not hurt you to spend a night thinking about your strength and how you have made decisions these past years.'

'Do you think Devlin suggested marriage because he sees you as less than you are?' her mother asked. 'Or because he wants a strong woman at his side?'

Her mother patted Rachael's knee. 'And even if he cannot put it into words, that's what he wants. That is what he tried to create in you when he encouraged you to go to the dances and become a part of his world. Our actions are truer than our words.'

Thunder rolled in the distance, muted by the walls of the carriage and the sounds of the horses' hooves.

'Wait until later in the morning to take the carriage,' her father said, 'since you are not dashing off to meet a future husband. I've already arranged for Grimsley to be collected and give me the fortnight's accounting of the shop. I want to review the plans the two of you have had. And I want to make sure there are no canes with swords in them ordered. I cannot believe you ordered so many of those *headache powder* rings. It takes courage to order such things.'

'Does it really?' her mother asked, her words for him, but her face towards Rachael. 'I would think there was little courage involved. In business, not all ventures succeed. Not all marriages. Even though Devlin's parents aren't a perfect couple, each has been rewarded from it. Vows are symbolic and the foundation of a



marriage. They are glue, not sweetened fluff.'

'I know full well it is not a meringue.'

'Don't expect perfection. Marriage is a skill some people have—like business talents.'

'That is not romantic.'

'Perhaps not. Your father's and my marriage is a habit of courtesy and love that we fell into and with honesty and strength almost any two caring people can do it. Unfortunately, you won't know if the strength is there beforehand. No one does. Just like profits in a shop.'

Her mother put her hand to her chin. 'I would say it is a lot like starting a business with a partner and you can only prepare as much as possible beforehand and hope that you know what you're doing.'

'You make it sound like too much of a risk for a sensible person.'

'Everything worth having is a risk.' Her mother patted Rachael's knee again. 'Even children. When the Countess and I met again after not seeing each other for all those years, I told her how long you'd been betrothed and that Tenney couldn't seem to pick one day out of three hundred and sixty-five. And she told me she had three sons, none of whom seemed to be aware that all the young women she'd been inviting to events might be more than just dance partners.'

'You were both matchmaking?' Rachael asked, surprised.

'Attempting. We left the actual decision up to the two of you. But, never doubt that it gets your ire up if someone *tells* you what to do. I've asked you to do things your whole life and so has your father. Other people are not so well trained as we are.'

## *Chapter Twenty-Five*

That morning, Grimsley came to give her father the accounts for the business and her maid summoned her. Rachael was pacing the floor. She'd been ready to leave shortly after she'd woken and she'd woken early.

'Your father asked if you might attend the meeting with Mr Grimsley.' The maid rushed in, her cheeriness flooding the room.

Rachael straightened her skirt. She might have trained her parents well, but they had done the same with her, no matter what her mother said. She walked downstairs and listened to the men talk and she gave her opinions forthrightly.

After the meeting had concluded, Rachael rode with Grimsley and her mother as he was returned to the shop.

Instead of going to Devlin immediately, she went inside to inspect Grimsley's latest acquisitions as she'd agreed earlier that morning when speaking with her father.

'We've another arrival from Mr Abernathy.'

'I must see it,' she said. Abernathy was her favourite craftsman. Metal was his canvas and the jewels were his oils.

'Six rings this time,' Grimsley said. 'He purchased the rubies at a small price and is happy that you said we would buy all he can provide if he passes the bargain on to us, and that he can make them as he pleases. And he was able to make a gimmel ring for you as you asked. With tiny rubies.'

He secured the bag, held it out and she picked out the treasures one by one until she saw the rubies. She pulled it into the light. She didn't know for sure what she would do with it when she requested it, but now she was certain.

'I believe I will keep this one.'

Grimsley's grin sparkled many times bigger than the small swirl of rubies. 'Excellent choice.'

She clasped the bands so that they pressed against her skin.

'Do you think we can do it? Make the shop a success?' she asked.

'For the first time in five years, I am anticipating the future. Mr Abernathy and I talked at length when he dropped off the jewels. We both have a new enthusiasm for our work. And he will ascertain that Miss Rachael gets his best designs.'

They both gave a nod before she walked into the dreary day, but the air had a crispness that pleased her more than if the sun had shone brightly.

She hurried to the carriage, her mother beside her.

Inside, she picked at the lace on the sleeve on her oldest, most favourite dress.

‘Have a maid stitch that in place for you,’ her mother said.

‘This one is always being mended.’

‘Perhaps you should get a new one.’

‘I don’t mind. This suits me.’

Rachael straightened the skirt, examining the faded flowers on the fabric. This was not the glorious gown she might wear to a *soirée*, cloaked in jewels from the shop.

This was the dress for home. For bookwork. Not the dancing dress—the one with the poufs of cloth and the best cloak.

She could be comfortable in both. Wearing the jewellery did not change who she was. Nor did she wear it to elevate herself. It was beauty and, as Devlin had pointed out about songbirds singing as they should, the same was true for everything. No one would ask flowers to please stop blooming as their petals were much too graceful for a sad day.

She could wear the flowing strands of armour, the baubles on her wrist as gauntlets and the rings as shields while she danced into the night and she could put everything neatly on the shelf when she returned home.

It wasn’t about how she appeared to others, it was about who she was when she thought of herself and it was no disservice to imagine herself as a strong person, particularly as she had been so afraid at the first *soirées*.

No one had been her friend and she’d often been seen as an outsider, but it didn’t matter. It only mattered how she saw herself and that she continually took steps to increase her internal promise of retaining the vision of who she wanted to be.

Mr Grimsley had told her that it was impossible to gauge what would sell and what wouldn’t. Originally, he’d not felt it right to risk the success without her father’s agreement. One had to take chances and her father had become unwilling to take those leaps of faith. As his failures had dwindled, so had his successes.

Devlin was worth the risk of failure and the risk of success.

She thought of the last few days.

He was more important to her than the jewellery shop. He made her heart glow as bright as rubies. As sparkling as a betrothal ring shared by lovers.

She didn't want to live without him and she didn't want to live apart from him if she had a choice in the matter.

Immediately upon opening the door, the butler's eyes darted around, searching for a chaperon, then her mother stepped into view behind her.

'We're here to speak with the Countess.'

'I will see if she is in.'

With the briefest amount of time, the butler returned and led her to the Countess's sitting room.

After tea, Devlin appeared in the hallway, but didn't move to join them. Giving a quick greeting, bow included, he waited, perfection on view, filling the doorway, the light from the window seeming to reflect from his smile and showcase the trim length of his legs.

He'd been created for light, laughter and her eyes.

'I hate to disappoint you, but she arrived to visit me,' the Countess said, rising. 'Her mother wished me to have a handkerchief she'd embroidered.'

'Perhaps Rachael would like to take a stroll in the garden,' he suggested.

The Countess stopped in front of her son. 'I suspect she might.' She brushed him aside. 'Now I want to show Mrs Albright some of my stitchery and it is a shame I didn't bring a needle with me as you would move from the doorway much more quickly if I had.' She made a jabbing motion with her hand and he took one step aside.

It surprised Rachael to see the Countess jesting with her son and his mother gave him a sideways hug when she walked by him.

He took one step inside, waiting until their mothers left. 'My butler informed me you were here. I hope you came to see me.'

'Yes.' She rose and stood in front of him. The ruby ring still rested on her thumb. She took it off. 'I saw this and wanted to give it to you as a thank-you token for saving my life. Well, I wanted to give half of it to you.'

He took the ring and, with a deft movement, separated it. The two circles interlaced to make one and slipped apart to make two.

'When I went to the parties and you weren't there, they were devoid of music. You add to the simplest moments. The moments of quiet talking. The moments of dancing. All of them are better with you in them.'

'You need to know that I'm proud of the steps that you've made.'

'Father told me the shop has improved and he feels hopeful for the first time in years. I don't want to put it aside. I appreciate your

offer of letting your man of affairs help me and I will ask for advice, but I want to continue my family's heritage. If I have children, I want the excitement of training them to follow in my steps, if they want, sons or daughters.'

'What better plan for them than to have a mother who loves them and wants to help them grow into the path they prefer? But I would also want them to have a strong family in their lives. A purpose for life itself.'

He took the ring and it fitted perfectly on his smallest finger. He returned the other half to her. 'I'll treasure it. Will you marry me so I can perform the custom of giving you the matching circle as a token of our love during our wedding ceremony?'

'I love you,' she said and threw her arms around him. 'Thank you for asking. Yes.'

He'd not even noticed that he'd held his breath while he waited for her answer, until she'd spoken.

This time, when he heard the word *love*, it was as if he'd been given a pair of wings that could take him anywhere.

He pulled her into his arms, the kiss blazing and nothing else mattering in the world.

Then he stepped back and slipped the ring from his other smallest finger. 'I have this for you, if you want it. I chose it for you, hoping you would some day be my wife. And if not, I would always have it as a memento of our time together.'

She reached up and clasped her fingers around his, their hands together, holding the jewel. And the devotion in his eyes pulled her closer and she knew she'd made the right decision and the one that would build her strength, her heart and her happiness.

## *Chapter Twenty-Six*

The month following the wedding had been one of the most blissful of Rachael's life. She'd wanted a simple wedding. Vows spoken softly and a quiet wedding breakfast, but Devlin would have none of it.

He insisted that it would be best to show everyone that theirs was a true love match and that they'd discovered each other on the night of his mother's party, and it had been a quick path to what would be everlasting devotion.

The newspaper had even reported their happy news and claimed that the true reason for Rachael's broken betrothal was that once she and Devlin had met, he'd known that she was the spark in his life and she was the flame in his. The article made twenty-three flammable references.

Payton told her she should thank him as he had provided the story as he had been repeating it often enough.

Devlin said it didn't matter what was printed, all that concerned him was that they were together.

Both his parents were at the wedding breakfast and, even though they did not always get on well, their connection was obvious. In public, they thrived on being a couple and, in the privacy of their home, they thrived on verbally jousting with each other. It was a marriage that they had made their own, an imperfect one at times, but one that suited them both.

When she'd seen them together and saw their verbal jabs, Devlin confided to her that was how he'd developed the easy way he had and the ability to calm most situations. In part, his early life had trained him to soothe them and lighten the situation. But she had met his uncle and she saw the family charm that couldn't be kept below the surface. A twinkling eye, a mouth that always ended in a smile and all the gentlemanly courtesies anyone could ask for.

The biggest shock of the marriage hadn't been that Devlin sometimes wore spectacles when he deciphered the smallest writing regarding his father's properties, but that he found it so easy to shed the gaiety that he presented at parties and become silent when he was at home, comfortable with sitting beside her, poring over ledgers and writing instructions in the margins of them.

She'd asked him why he wrote in the volumes and he'd been

puzzled, telling her he'd never paid any attention, but he'd done it as he thought of what he'd just seen and it helped give them a record for the future.

He and his father often shared breakfast, even if his father arrived late for it, and they always spoke of their properties and the course of action they should take to keep everything running smoothly.

His mother avoided the breakfast table, but Rachael had taken to eating with them and they'd listened to her questions about her plans for the shop as if it were their own venture, yet neither had insisted she take their advice which they offered freely.

Now she felt as comfortable in the house as if she'd been born there and no longer felt she had a tenuous slipper in society, but a well-placed one. She'd even looked through the fashion plates again and found the dress she'd thought much too costly and attention-grabbing for her. Devlin had told her she would look lovely in it and insisted she purchase it.

And for the tenth time, Grimsley had reassured her that sales had doubled and their profits were even doing better. In only a few days, the new undertaking would open and he and the apprentice were both working long days to get everything in order.

'I found Scamp,' Devlin said as she stepped into the bedchamber, swirling the silken dressing gown around her like veils, letting the sunlight from the window reflect off them. She let the fabric float to her sides.

'His owner was walking—well—creeping along with him and I stopped the carriage. He said he'd been visiting near my house one night and thought Scamp was asleep in his curricule, but when he'd returned Scamp had been gone. He was ever so relieved to see him again.'

'Aren't you happy that they were able to find each other? I would hate to think of keeping him when his owner had lost him.'

He nodded. 'It did please me. And I discovered that Scamp's true name was Gerald, which made me take in how little I truly knew him. But the owner said I was free to stop by his home at any time if I wanted to visit with Gerald.'

'That sounds lovely.'

'To everyone but Scamp. He growled at me. I think he was afraid I'd take him from his owner and he'd have to find his way home again.'

'Well, you proved with your devotion to a really frail-looking dog that you could be protective.'

'But didn't you already have an idea of that?'

'Yes, I did. When you saw what was going to happen before

anyone else and you grasped me up in your arms and smothered out the flames. I hate to think what would have happened if we hadn't truly met that night.'

'I suspect it was meant to be that we would encounter each other at a time in our lives when we were receptive to finding a true commitment,' he said. 'Just like the fact that I may have seen Scamp many times over the past few years, yet I never noticed him until I heard his barking near my house one night. In fact, had I left him on the street a little longer, his owner might have found him. He said he searched for him well into the night and the next day. But then a few days later, he drove his carriage by my house, still searching, called out and Scamp...er... Gerald, bounded out and to the carriage.'

'Perhaps when we recognise something's worth, that's when we find it.' Then she held out her finger so he could see the lustre of the stone.

'I'm pleased you aren't wearing one of the poison containers,' he said, moving to her and holding up both her hands and giving an exaggerated inspection.

'I like the one you gave me best,' she said.

'You seem at ease when you are out, wearing them.'

'Yes.' She pulled her hands free and studied the jewel. 'I'm more comfortable now with the large ones that are noticed and pull the eye. With the smaller ones, I enjoy showing the craftsmen's skill and the artistry. Each item we have is like a little treasure to me now. Even the buckles for shoes.'

She slid against him and took off the small band on her finger. 'This ring is of exceptional quality. The gold has been lightly mixed with other metals and still has a softness and a sheen that lets me know the value.'

She held it up. 'The engraving you added makes it even more precious. *You warm my heart.*'

'And my life. With you by my side, I can see myself better. I don't always like what I learn, but not everything that's true is easy to accept.'

He embraced her as she slipped the ring back on. 'I hope you like it and all the changes in us that it will bring with it.'

'I do. At first, being in society was a charade that I had to live, albeit a charming one. But now I don't feel the same. It's a part of me. I wear the jewellery like a cloak. A uniform. What I wear to go into the world and joust with others, or now even laugh with them. I am comfortable wearing it and at night, I'm comfortable taking it off.'



His lips brushed her ears and she heard the intensity in his words. 'I'm comfortable with your taking it off.' His voice became serious. 'The ornamentation doesn't matter to me at all. The person on the inside is who I married.'

'Mmm...' she said, relaxing against him. 'I do love you.'

'Before you said you loved me, I realised I didn't want to go anywhere but into your arms, your bed and hold you for the rest of my life. That one small word, which meant more than I ever expected, convinced me you would be the only one for me. For ever.'

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# *A Marriage Made in Secret*

by Jenni Fletcher

## *Chapter One*

*Palace of Vincennes, France*  
*—summer 1325*

‘Your Grace!’

Mathilde jumped to her feet in alarm as a boy burst like a small, grinning assassin into the Queen’s withdrawing chamber, provoking a chorus of muffled screams from the gathered ladies. If they’d been in London, she thought, he would have been dragged straight to the Tower for causing such a commotion, but fortunately for him, they were a long way from England, in a palace to the east of Paris on a rainy and uneventful afternoon.

The boy’s cheeks were red and he was panting, but his face was alive with excitement, as if he knew that his intrusion would be a welcome one. To the surprise of almost everyone in the room, he was right. He didn’t say another word, simply dropped down on to one knee, yet Queen Isabella lifted her gaze from the gilt-edged book of Arthurian tales she was reading and smiled.

Isabella, born a Princess of France and now the crowned Queen of England, smiled. Not a slight regal curve of her lips for once either, but a real, rare smile that transformed her whole face and sparked a fiery light in her usually impenetrable blue eyes.

Mathilde watched, enthralled. The first time she’d set eyes on the Queen, she’d thought her the most beautiful woman in the world, but at that moment she surpassed even herself, like a lily opening its petals in sunshine, emerging from a bud of passive prettiness into confident, blazing beauty. As Isabella rose imperiously to her feet, the effect seemed to become even more pronounced, the folds of her pale yellow surcoat catching the light from the dozens of candles around her so that they shone like molten gold. It was impossible *not* to stare at someone so dazzling.

‘Madame Baudin has arrived?’ Isabella arched one slender eyebrow and the messenger nodded, still panting from his exertions. ‘Good.’ She waved her fingers in a gesture of dismissal. ‘You may wait outside.’

The boy backed out of the room and the Queen’s eyes turned

speculatively in Mathilde's direction, narrowing slightly. 'You. Your name is Mathilde, is it not?'

'Yes, Your Grace.' Nervously, she dipped into a curtsy, dropping her embroidery in the process. In two months, the Queen had barely acknowledged her presence, let alone used her name, treating her with the same resentful disdain she reserved for all her newer attendants. Mathilde couldn't entirely blame her. They were only there because the King had locked up her loyal French ladies-in-waiting and replaced them with his English spies, but *she* at least wasn't a spy. She was a nobody, the daughter of a man to whom the King had owed a favour, that was all, a last-minute addition to Isabella's retinue before she'd embarked upon her diplomatic mission to France. *She* was new and young, as the other ladies never ceased to remind her. Obscure and impoverished, too, their tone suggested, which was true even if she couldn't help it. Her family weren't important or rich or even particularly noble, but her father's past loyalty had been enough to secure her a position at court. It was a great honour, one she wished every day had been bestowed upon somebody else.

'Come closer.' The Queen lifted one elegantly manicured hand, beckoning her forward, and she obeyed at once. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Lady Berthe, chief of the spies, move as if to join them, before Isabella stilled her with a sharp look.

'Cecily?' The sharpness softened as the Queen called out to one of her older English attendants, the ones who'd joined her household when she'd first arrived in London as a young bride seventeen years earlier. There were only two of them remaining, Lady Cecily d'Abernon and Katharine Sykes, and both were fiercely protective.

'Yes, Your Grace?' Lady Cecily bobbed into a curtsy.

'I want to wear my lilac gown tonight, the one with the silver trim, but I'm afraid there's a tear in one of the sleeves.'

'I believe you are right, Your Grace.' Whether it was right or wrong, Lady Cecily's face was a picture of innocence. 'In fact, there are several items in your wardrobe that require attention. We have time to do some mending now, if Your Grace would excuse us?'

'Of course.' Isabella inclined her head as if she were conferring some great favour. 'Mathilde here will stay and keep me company. Kat, too.'

Lady Cecily curtsied again, bustling the spies out of the chamber before they had a chance to think up excuses to stay.

'That's better.' The Queen waited until the door was completely closed before letting out a long sigh, as if she'd been holding her breath. 'How old are you, Mathilde?'

‘Seventeen, Your Grace.’

‘So old? And with such pretty eyes. Yet still unmarried?’

‘Yes, Your Grace.’ She blushed, pleased with the compliment despite the sting in its tail. Her sister Hawise had always said that her eyes were her best feature, a deep, dark brown like their mother’s had been, though as for the rest of her, she knew that she was ordinary. Pretty enough, but no great beauty and without any dowry. *That* was why she remained unmarried. Why she’d been sent to court, too, or one of the reasons anyway. At home she’d been surplus to requirements whereas here she could earn her own keep.

‘You need not look so embarrassed. There are worse things than remaining unmarried, is that not so, Kat?’ Isabella exchanged a knowing look with the widowed Katharine, who only grunted. ‘Tell me, which would you prefer, a bad husband or no husband at all?’

Mathilde hesitated, baulking at the question. It wasn’t one she’d ever had cause to consider before, but the Queen was waiting expectantly, the full penetrating force of her blue gaze focused upon her. ‘I think no husband at all, Your Grace.’

‘Then you may be just the girl I’m looking for.’ Isabella’s expression warmed. ‘You hail from the north of England, as I recall?’

‘Yes, Your Grace. From Rudstone Manor near Scarborough.’

‘Ah, now I remember. Your father helped my husband during the rebellion.’

‘He did.’ She nodded eagerly. After fourteen years, her father still seized any opportunity to talk about the day the second King Edward had ridden into their courtyard, fleeing from Thomas of Lancaster’s forces. ‘He gave him food and fresh horses and then rode to York beside him. He always says it was the greatest honour of his life.’

‘As it was...at the time.’ A shadow of some emotion crossed the Queen’s face, so fleetingly it was impossible to identify. Impatience? Annoyance? Mathilde dropped her gaze to the rug, afraid that she’d said something displeasing. ‘So now my husband has repaid him by giving you a place in my household?’

‘Yes, Your Grace. My father brought me to London to ask it.’ And then abandoned her there, she thought bitterly, biting her tongue to stop herself from saying the words out loud.

‘So you have no other connection to the King...or his friends?’

‘None, Your Grace,’ she answered with complete honesty. She’d only glimpsed the King from a distance and she knew nothing of his friends.

‘Good. What do you think, Kat? Is she trustworthy?’

‘If she’s not, then she’ll answer to me.’

‘I am, Your Grace,’ Mathilde countered at once, indignant at any suggestion otherwise.

‘I believe you, girl.’

Isabella’s tone was soothing and for the first time since leaving her family, Mathilde felt a sense of kinship with someone. No, she corrected herself quickly, that was the wrong word. She could never be kin with the Queen, but somehow the words made her feel less isolated.

‘Come over here.’ Isabella sat down in a window seat, as far away from the door as possible, laying a hand on the maroon velvet cushion beside her.

‘Thank you, Your Grace.’ Mathilde threw a quick glance at Katharine, who had her arms folded across her chest like a sentinel, before obeying, her heart thumping with excitement even as her knees shook with nerves. She was glad to sit down before they gave way altogether, although it felt strange to sit so close to someone as extraordinary as the Queen. As women, they were only thirteen years apart, but Isabella was everything she knew that she would never, *could never*, be.

‘I have a request to make of you, Mathilde, one that must remain a secret between us.’ Isabella paused significantly. ‘I need someone like you to carry messages for me. Cecily has been unwell of late and Kat cannot walk as far or fast as she once did.’ She pressed her lips together as Katharine made a loud tsking sound from across the room. ‘Do you think you could help me, Mathilde?’

‘I would be honoured, Your Grace.’

‘I thought so.’ Isabella pulled a ruby and gold ring from her finger. ‘I knew that you weren’t like the rest of them. Here, hold out your hand.’

Mathilde gasped as the Queen placed the sparkling band in the centre of her palm. It looked valuable, probably equivalent to several years’ worth of harvests at home.

‘Now, the boy will take you to someone, a guest. Show him this ring and tell him to meet me in the French King’s private apartments at once.’

‘Yes, Your Grace, but...’ Mathilde drew her brows together. The boy had spoken of a Madame Baudin...

‘A necessary deception.’ Isabella seemed to understand her confusion, throwing a telling glance in the direction of her dressing chamber. ‘When the others ask, which they will, tell them that an old nurse from my childhood has come to visit me. It doesn’t matter whether or not they believe it. All that matters is that they do not

discover the truth. This must be *our* secret, do you understand?’

‘Yes, Your Grace.’

‘Thank you.’ The Queen touched a hand to her cheek. There was something almost maternal about the gesture, Mathilde thought, a tenderness that made her heart glow. ‘Remember to trust no one except myself, Katharine or Lady Cecily.’

Mathilde nodded and stood, dipping into another curtsy without asking for any more details. The identity of the guest was none of her business and the dour expression on Katharine’s face warned her not to pry. In truth, she didn’t care who it was. Isabella, her Queen, had touched her cheek and asked for her help. That was all that mattered now.

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A Cinderella for the Viscount

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